

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOTHOCK

—ゴシックーその罪は名もなき



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角川ビーンズ文庫



GOSICK

—ゴシック—



「レディの入浴だ。あっち行け」

「ご、ご、ごめん！
廊下にいるから。
なにかおかしなことがあつたら
呼んでくれよ」

一弥はヴィクトリカを守ろうと
バスルームの扉に張りついていた



GOSICK

久城一弥
極東の島国ヨリソーユル王國に留学してきた、心優しき優等生。堅物で正義感に溢れた、軍人一家の三男。

ヴィクトリカ・ド・ブロワ
書物・甘いお菓子・フレールを愛する、謎多き天才美少女。図書館塔最上階で膨大な書物を読むのが日課。

グレヴィール・ド・ブロワ
ヴィクトリカの養母兄で、地元警察署警部。魚男だが、普段はなぜかドリルのような奇怪な髪型をしている。

アブリル・ブラッドリー
英國から学園に留学してきた怪談好きな美少女。冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。

CHARACTERS

セシル先生
一弥とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童顔の女性。

コルデリア・ギャロ …謎の人物。
ミルドレッド・アーボガスト …シスター。
セルジウス …村長。
ハーマイニア …メイド。
アンブローズ …村長の助手。
シオドア …前村長。

イラスト／武田日向

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Run along and see you don't return without the snowdrops.

—*Samuil Marshak, The Twelve Months*

Prologue: I am Innocent

Something round, shiny, and golden was glowing in the dark.

In a small, cramped room in the back of a large mansion, wrapped in darkness and a silence so tense it seemed to cut your cheek, Cordelia studied the strange round, shiny, golden object.

What is it? she wondered.

Her curly hair, soft as cotton candy, draped over her cheek. She was a lovely little maid. She was clutching an iron candlestick, which looked out of place in her tiny, plump, childlike hands.

The candle's weak orange flame provided very little light on the floor of the dark room.

The strange object was lying on the floor.

Cordelia reached out and cautiously picked it up.

It's beautiful!

It felt smooth. She held it close to her face. It was round and flat, with a human's face carved onto it. For some reason, there were also numbers on it. She wondered what they meant.

The candle's flame flickered with Cordelia's faint breath, and the strange object sparkled in response.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!

Eyes glittering, Cordelia stroked the strange object over and over again with her fingers. The thing sparkled even more as though it was happy to be stroked. She was gazing at it cheerfully, when she suddenly noticed something. She held the candlestick downward.

To the right, to the left. In front and behind. She illuminated the dark floor.

One, two, three. Cordelia's face filled with wonder. *More weird things!* *There's so many of them on the floor!*

Cordelia crouched down and reached out slowly. Strange objects were strewn all over the floor. The candle's flame glinted softly on the round and golden objects, coloring Cordelia's pretty little face golden.

So many treasures! So pretty!

Cordelia happily picked them up, but there were so many that she couldn't collect them all.

Her small face gradually contorted in fear. Strength left her hands, and the strange objects spilled onto the floor again, rattling.

What are they? Why are they on the floor? Oh, right. There was supposed to be someone here. Where are they?

She looked around carefully.

The room was shrouded in jet-black darkness.

Cordelia called out with a trembling voice, but there was no answer. Her voice became muffled, as though swallowed by the darkness. Her red lips tightened.

Whoosh!

The candle flame rippled.

Chapter 1: Victorique de Blois is a Gray Wolf

It was a sunny afternoon.

The vines twisting around the wooden houses lining both sides of the street had turned bright green, swaying softly in the gentle breeze. The sky above was a clear blue. Early summer was approaching, the most comfortable days in this region.

A calm afternoon.

The door of a small, vine-covered post office in a corner of the village flung open, and a small oriental boy stepped out. He was dressed in the uniform of St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school for nobility located at the foot of a mountain not far from the village. A school cap sat on his head.

As he walked away, lips pursed and his back straightened, the boy—Kazuya Kujou—mumbled to himself, “I asked for books, not money. Why would they send me allowance? Maybe they didn’t receive my letter in time? Hmm...”

In his hand was an envelope sent through international mail.

“What do I do with this? Eh, whatever. Let’s head back to the academy for now.”

While walking, the door of a small general store facing the street opened. A tall girl dressed in the same St. Marguerite Academy uniform came out, carrying a shopping bag.

She had short, blond hair, and long, slender legs. Possessing mature features, she was quite the beauty. When she spotted Kazuya, her face lit up.

“Ah, Kujou!”

Her loud voice made Kazuya yelp and jump. Startled by his reaction, the girl also gave a yelp and shrank back.

“For goodness’ sake!” She glared at him, pouting. “Your screaming scared the living daylights out of me.”

“Oh, Avril. It’s just you.”

Displeased by his reaction, the girl—Avril Bradley—kept her cheeks puffed for a while.

Eventually, her smile returned. “What do you have there? A letter?”

“Yeah... So, uhh... W-Wait!”

Avril snatched the envelope from Kazuya’s hand and peered inside. “Oh, allowance!”

“Yeah. My brother sent it to me.”

“I wish I had some! My parents are so stingy. Girls like me have things to buy.”

“Ahuh...” Kazuya gave a vague reply, nodding along.

Avril held the envelope for a while with an envious look, then reluctantly handed it back to Kazuya.

She smiled again. “So, what are you buying?”

“Huh? I-I don’t know. I’ve got my textbooks, and I brought clothes, daily necessities, and all the other stuff I need from home. Hmm? What is it?” Kazuya panicked. Avril was staring at him intently.

She put her hands on her hips. “There’s a difference between what you need and what you want.”

“Huh?”

“Kujou, you’re such a stick-in-the-mud.”

“What?”

“Let me tell you something. The best part about shopping is looking around and trying to decide what to buy.”

“I don’t get it. Just buy what you need and go home.”

“You’re not getting it. Shopping is a pastime.”

“Really?” Kazuya inclined his head.

Avril was getting irritated. “I know,” she said firmly. “I’ll take you somewhere nice. Come on.”

“I, uhh...”

“Hmm? Why are you planting your feet firmly? If you don’t come, I’ll get mad.”

“...Sorry.”

Kazuya had a bad feeling about this. Avril pulled him in the opposite direction of the academy.

The year 1924.

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small nation in Europe.

Boasting a long history and tradition, Sauville was a small but powerful kingdom that survived the Great War at the beginning of the century, and was called the little giant of Western Europe. Its territory was long and narrow, reminiscent of a tower. Fertile vineyards sprawled on its border with France. The Gulf of Lyon on the Mediterranean Sea, a summer resort for the aristocracy, separated it from Italy. Rolling plateaus and deep mountains surrounded its border.

If the Gulf of Lyon was the luxurious door to the plentiful kingdom, the Alps were the secret attic located deep inside. In this secret location stood a school.

St. Marguerite Academy.

Situated in a pleasant place surrounded by greenery, the school was a majestic stone building in the shape of a U when viewed from above. The school also boasted a long history and tradition, though not as long as the kingdom itself. A secret place where entry was forbidden to anyone except related personnel, only the children of nobility were allowed admission.

But after the end of the world war, St. Marguerite Academy began accepting promising youth from allied nations as exchange students.

Hailing from an island nation in the Far East, Kazuya Kujou was a well-mannered boy with excellent grades. The youngest of a military family, he had two brilliant older brothers, the eldest a scholar and the second an aspiring politician. Kazuya, brilliant himself and straight-laced, was recommended to be an exchange student.

However, what awaited the thrilled Kazuya was the prejudice of the noble children and the mysterious supernatural stories that were rampant throughout the academy.

He had a hard time adjusting to school, got involved in strange incidents, made strange friends. All in all, it had been a rough six months.

“So, late that night, as they were driving along the forest road, they were overtaken by something shiny and silvery. They looked out the window and

to their surprise, it was the armor of a knight running at full speed!"

"Whoa, sounds scary."

"As the armor passed them, it slowly looked back at the automobile.
But..."

"Nice weather we're having today, huh?"

"...It was empty inside! Kyaaaaaaaaaa!"

Kazuya let out a shriek.

Avril laughed. "You screamed again. Scaredy-scat. Kujou, the scared-cat! Ahahaha!"

Kazuya continued walking with a somewhat resentful expression on his face. "Like I've been saying, it's your screams, not the story."

"Sure it is."

"I'm telling the truth! Besides, there's no such thing as ghosts."

"Of course there is."

"Have you seen one?"

"Not really... But a friend of a friend of a friend have."

As they walked along, a wagon pulled by an old, hairy horse passed by.

The street was lined with wooden houses on either side, bright-green vines crawling on their white walls. The geraniums decorating the window sills were red dots swaying in the soft breeze.

The soft scent of earth and grass drifted in from somewhere, perhaps from the sprawling vineyards a short distance away from the village.

It was a mild, gentle season.

The village streets in the late afternoon was getting more and more crowded. Kazuya and Avril ambled along, arguing about the existence of ghosts.

Before Kazuya, uncharacteristically unyielding, could win the argument, Avril grumbled, "It's more fun when ghosts exist."

"That's not the point. Besides—"

"You know that friend of yours? Victorique, was it? There's a rumor that she's actually not human, but a gray wolf. Isn't it exciting? Your friend might be a legendary creature!"

"It's not! Who spread that rumor anyway? It's just rude."

He had had a hard time making friends in the past six months since coming from Japan because of stories that said he was the Reaper. He didn't

think he would ever like horror stories, no matter how widespread they were.

Avril pouted. "You're such a buzzkill."

"Ugh..." Kazuya shut his mouth.

In the eastern island country where Kazuya was born and raised, men were taught to do what they had to do quietly without complaints. Kazuya tried to do his best, but things were different after he came to study in Sauville.

Avril Bradley, a foreign exchange student from England who had become a good friend of his, often made fun of him for being too serious and hard-headed. And his other friend—also a girl—constantly called him a simpleton and a mediocre egghead. Kazuya found it depressing.

"Ah, Kujou. We're here." Avril cheerfully pointed at something, completely oblivious to Kazuya's brooding.

Kazuya raised his head. Countless villagers were gathered in the square at the intersection of two streets. A flea market had been set up in the square, overflowing with goods and shoppers alike.

"Today is the once-a-month flea market," Avril said. "I've been saving up my allowance for this."

"Really...?"

Avril pulled on his hand and dragged him into the middle of the crowd of shoppers.

A variety of stores stood in a row. Antique dealers, who had come all the way here just for this occasion, were selling antique dolls and lovely tableware sets that looked like they were made in the last century. A village girl, who seemed to be about the same age as Kazuya, giggled as she offered them handmade herbal soaps and potpourri. An old woman with a gentle smile was tending to a store full of colorful scarves.

While Kazuya was goggling at the sheer number of items, he felt a tug at his uniform.

"You there. Come take a look. It'll be worth your time, I tell ya." Their voice sounded awfully coquettish.

Kazuya turned around and saw a young nun sitting there, garbed in a stuffy habit. Her voice didn't seem to match her appearance.

"Come take a gander," she said.

"O-Okay..."

Avril, who had been walking ahead, noticed that Kazuya was not following and scuttled back. When she saw the stall in front of him, her face lit up.

“It’s a church bazaar,” she said.

“Is that what this is?”

“Yup. You should buy something, Kujou. A church bazaar sells items donated by followers, so they’re cheaper than the others. Besides, this stall is cute!”



She was right. Among the items laid out in front of the nun were delicate handmade laces, sparkling glassware, antique rings, and other items that were a little old-fashioned but still pretty even to a boy's eyes.

Kazuya studied them with a stern look. "All right. I'm buying one."

"What, really?" Avril was a little surprised.

Staring grimly at the items, he added, "Though I'm not sure which one to get." Kazuya looked at the nun.

He couldn't tell the color of her hair, as it was hidden underneath her robe, but she had clear, almond eyes, a peculiar bluish-gray that he had never seen before. They had a lonely but striking gleam to them, like looking at the desert skies. She must have been eighteen or nineteen years old.

But her puritanical attire and clear eyes conflicted with the casual manner in which she spoke and the way she sat on a wooden box with her legs spread out wide like a man.

What's more, she had been snorting loudly and roughly scratching her head. Her mannerisms were unbefitting of a nun. Her waxy, freckled face looked somewhat distinctive—she could be odd or beautiful depending on the beholder.

"Um..." Before Kazuya could speak, his nose picked up a strange, sweet smell coming from the nun. It was an odd scent, not perfume.

Ah! It's alcohol, he thought. *But why would a nun smell like booze?*

The tips of her leather shoes that he glimpsed through the bottom of her garb were stained white. A nun, who should be living an ascetic lifestyle, reeked of alcohol in the middle of the day, their shoes dirty. Was that even possible?

"What?" the nun said gruffly.

Kazuya panicked. "Oh, uhm... I-I was just wondering if you had some nice souvenir for a girl..."

"A girl?"

"Y-Yeah..."

He was getting embarrassed. While wondering if he should forget about it, Avril's face lit up.

Kazuya picked up a laced detachable collar. "What about this? I'm not really sure... Avril, can you stand over there for a sec? Oh, bend down a

little. A little more. More. Should be about right. She's always sitting down, so I can't really tell. Hmm..."

Avril looked happy at first, but each time she was asked to bend down, she looked more and more puzzled, until eventually her smile turned into a frown. The nun, her legs still spread open, regarded them with a dumbfounded look. When she realized what was happening, she stifled a laugh.

Kazuya picked up a cute little handbag and an old-fashioned but elegantly-designed ring, and pondered things over. Avril snatched them all away.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"These won't do."

"Huh?"

"Are these for a certain someone whose name starts with a V?"

"Uh, yeah. She can't... I mean, won't get out of the academy. Wait, do you know Victorique?"

"Not personally, no." Avril kicked at a pebble at her foot, looking disinterested, then lifted her head. "This one's good! Trust me!" She picked up a golden skull the size of her fist.

The nun gasped in horror.

"Wh-What's that?" Kazuya asked. "How do you use it?"

"Like this." With a serious face, Avril placed the skull on top of her head.

"Quit pulling my leg."

"I'm not. Also..." Avril pushed aside village girls who were looking at postcards. She rummaged through the pile and grabbed a postcard that featured a swarm of rats.

"...No way."

"This one, then." She picked up a glittering Indian turban designed like a crown.

Kazuya couldn't imagine her wearing it, but the turban alone was definitely pretty, like finely-crafted candy sculpture. He thought it over.

Avril waved it around. "Look, isn't it pretty? I'm sure she'll like it."

"Hmm..."

As Avril's eyes began to tear up, the nun chimed in, either out of sympathy or just for fun. "She's right. It looks great. I actually want it, but

unfortunately, it's for sale."

"Really?" Kazuya asked.

Avril and the nun exchanged looks, then simultaneously turned to Kazuya and nodded.

After contemplating for several more seconds, Kazuya ended up buying the strange Indian turban.

There were many other items in the church bazaar. The most eye-catching one was the lone beautiful Dresden Plate carefully displayed at the back. A lanky, old man wearing a fedora asked the nun about its price.

The nun proudly told the man the price. It was so ridiculously expensive that Kazuya and Avril glanced at each other. The old man gave a grunt and walked away, shaking his head.

The village girls looked at the nun. "Why is the plate a lot more expensive than the rest?"

"I don't really know much either," the nun said, "but apparently it's pretty old. It's got that historical value. A lady of faith donated it. It's today's main item."

The village girls bought postcards that featured pretty flowers and fruits and left.

"That plate's so pricey!" one said.

"But it's so old. You can't use it."

Their voices gradually faded away.

The old man still had not given up on the plate. He was staring at it from a distance, like he really wanted it. He had taken off his fedora, tucking it under his armpit, and was carrying a small vase of flowers that he had bought at some store.

"Would you like to buy this?" the nun asked.

Kazuya turned back to her. She was pointing at one of the items.

"I recommend this one. It's really cute and the price is reasonable."

"Hmm...?"

It was a palm-sized, square contraption—a music box. Avril reached for it.

"You put in a sheet music card, and it plays all kinds of tunes. You crank it manually. There's a lever over there."

"This one?" Avril placed the music box on her left hand and wound the lever with her right.

Bam!

There was a loud bang, and the music box broke into pieces. A big, white pigeon flew out, flapping its wings into the blue sky.

Avril shrieked, drew back a few steps, and looked at Kazuya. “Wh-What was that just now?”

The villagers were gaping at them. The pigeon circled the square twice, cooing, before flying away.

The nun screamed, drawing everyone’s attention. “The plate!” she shouted, cupping her cheeks, her bluish-gray eyes wide open.

Kazuya and Avril gasped.

The nun pointed with trembling fingers. The expensive plate had vanished like smoke. She sank down to her seat.

Avril’s lips were quivering from shock.

Kazuya looked around. The village girls who bought postcards were huddled together a little farther away, squealing. The old man was watching the scene with a curious look on his face.

“Call the cops,” someone whispered.

Kazuya, too, was stunned, but a different thought ran through his head.

I think this incident is the best gift for Victorique.

St. Marguerite Grand Library.

The academy was situated in spacious grounds, on gently-sloping plains between mountains. Standing quietly in the corner of the campus was a huge library that was over three hundred years old and one of Europe’s foremost bookhouses. Shaped like a polygonal tube, its stone-built exterior had been exposed to the elements for years, giving it a majestic appearance.

Clutching an Indian turban in one hand, Kazuya scurried along the white gravel path that led from the U-shaped main school building to the library.

“I’m later than usual because of that commotion,” he mumbled. “I hope she’s not mad...” Then he remembered that his friend wouldn’t really wait for him. “I guess it’s fine.” He frowned. She was rarely in a good mood anyway.

Kazuya arrived at the entrance of the library. A large, leather door with brass rivets loomed before him. He grabbed the doorknob with both hands and pulled as hard as he could.

The damp, cool air that filled the library caressed Kazuya's cheeks, carrying with it the smell of dust and dirt and intelligence. A solemn feeling rushed through him. He looked up.

The walls of the large library were filled with books. One might mistake them for some interior design, but it was all just books. The inside of the building was hollow, the ceiling covered in religious paintings. He glimpsed huge, bright, green leaves far above. Most people would assume they were just an optical illusion. After all, how could there be tropical trees at the very top of a library?

At the end of the hall on the first floor was a hydraulic elevator that had been installed during some restoration work at the beginning of the century, shrouded in an ominous shadow. Only faculty and one student were allowed to use it. He could not ride it.

Kazuya was about to climb a narrow, wooden staircase that connected the huge bookshelves on the walls. Like a giant perilous maze, the staircase led upward in a steep angle.

He sighed. "Such a long climb..."

There was something hanging down from the wooden railing near the ceiling. A golden sash. Her long hair.

"Looks like she's up there. Fine. Up we go."

Kazuya straightened his posture and walked up the narrow wooden stairs, his shoes clicking with each step. Looking down made him dizzy, so he told himself to keep his eyes forward.

According to one theory, the library was built in the early 17th century by the then king of Sauville. A henpecked husband, he built a secret room on the highest floor so he could indulge in the company of his young mistress. He designed the stairs to be a maze so that no one but them could climb it.

Yeah. Very few people would climb all the way up there, Kazuya thought. Unless they had a very good reason to.

He climbed. Up and up the stairs. Still going up. A little more. He was getting tired now.

When Kazuya finally reached the top floor, he called out the name of his friend with ragged breath.

"Victorique. Are you there?"

No reply. Like always.

Kazuya took a step forward. He was well aware of what lay ahead.
A conservatory.

The secret room at the top of the grand library was no longer a bedroom for the king and his mistress, but had been converted into a lush conservatory. Tropical trees, ferns, and garish flowers of striking colors were in full bloom, rustling in the breeze that flowed in through the open skylight.

It was a small paradise, quiet and full of life.

A lovely porcelain doll sat on the landing that led to the greenhouse. Nearly life-size, it was about 140 centimeters tall, garbed in an extravagant dress adorned with silk and torchon lace. It was wearing small shoes. Its long, magnificent, golden hair was not tied nor braided, cascading down to its feet, and coiling around itself like a velvet turban.

Its face looked as cool as porcelain. Its eyes, neither childlike nor mature, were only partly-open, as though in a dreamlike trance. The porcelain doll was smoking a pipe in its mouth. White smoke drifted toward the skylight.

Kazuya paused for a moment and gazed at what seemed like a still image. Then he returned to his usual expression and walked up to the beautiful, but very small girl—the girl that looked like a doll.

“I’ve been calling your name,” he said. “Can’t you at least answer?”

The girl opened her mouth just a little. “Oh, it’s you.”

Her voice was low and husky, like an old person’s, a sharp contrast from her small figure. After saying a few words, the girl—Victorique—closed her mouth again.

Several difficult books were laid out in a circle on the floor in front of her. They came in different languages, including Latin, German, and a squiggly writing system that seemed to be Arabic. The contents were also diverse, ranging from curses and alchemy to chemistry, advanced mathematics, and ancient history.

“Of course it’s me. Who else would climb all the way up here?”

“Ms. Cecile used to come by from time to time. I haven’t seen her much since she started asking you to run her errands.”

“I see.” Kazuya nodded.

Ms. Cecile was Kazuya Kujou’s, Avril Bradley’s, and Victorique de Blois’ homeroom teacher. Six months after Kazuya arrived here as an

exchange student and he still could not fit in with the noble children. Worried, Ms. Cecile started asking him to look after Victorique, a problem child who had not attended a single class since she entered the academy. Kazuya reluctantly began trekking to the library to see this mysterious girl, and as Victorique solved various cases that he got involved in, the two gradually got to know each other.

Every time he came to the garden, her blunt and snobbish attitude—a trait characteristic of the nobility—irked him, and he would vow never to return, but for some reason, he always ended up back here.

Kazuya cast a glance over at the space beside Victorique. A bunch of whiskey bonbons and macaroons lay scattered on the floor. Victorique was so absorbed in her reading that she seemed to have forgotten about the candies she had brought with her.

“What a mess,” Kazuya said. “You’re such a slob.” He gathered up the candies and put them in one place.

Paying no attention to him, Victorique said, “Do you believe in the existence of special races?”

Kazuya looked up in surprise at the sudden question.

“I mean people like the gods in mythology,” she continued. “The gods of Greek mythology, for example. Norse giants. There are legends of celestial beings in China as well. I’m sure there are some in your country, too.”

“Well, yeah... But they’re just myths.”

“Big, strong, almighty people, feared as gods by other races. Wouldn’t it be a little interesting if they really existed?”

Kazuya was focused in organizing the candies.

“If you look into the history of Eastern Europe, you will find a lot of references to the Saillune people. They’re a legendary race who had governed the war-torn lands of Eastern Europe since ancient times. They were small, powerless, and few in number, but they ruled the land with their brains. They fought bravely against the Khazars in the ninth century, the Pechenegs in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Polovets in the twelfth century, and even defeated the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Their people flourished for a long time. The Saillune were like the gods of legend, defeating horsemen who invaded in the spring, and slaying ferocious wild wolves that lived in the woods. But now they are nowhere to be found. No

nation named Saillune either. No matter what you read, there is no mention of them after the fifteenth century. One day, they suddenly vanished into thin air from Eastern Europe—no, from this earth. Where did they come from and where did they disappear to? One clue we have is that the fifteenth century was also the time of witch hunts and the Inquisition. Kujou, did you go to the village?”

Kazuya’s hands stopped. “Where’d that come from?” he asked, surprised. “Wait, how did you know?”

“I know exactly what you’re doing.”

“I mean, yeah, I guess.”

Victorique gave a small yawn. She reached for the candies that Kazuya gathered and rifled through the pile. Once she found a whiskey bonbon, she removed the wrapper and tossed it into her mouth.

Only her cheeks moved as she chewed, like it was a separate creature. Kazuya took the wrapper that she tossed aside and searched for a trash can, but when he found nothing of the sort, he shoved the wrapper into his own pocket instead.

Chewing on her candy, Victorique said, “The leaf on your head doesn’t belong to any of the trees inside the campus. First of all, there’s mail peeking out of your breast pocket. The fact that you were later than usual and in a hurry suggests that you went somewhere after your afternoon classes. That’s all. It’s quite simple, really.”

“I guess when you put it like that, sure. Still surprises me every time, though. You can guess everything I did without even watching me.”

Victorique suddenly lifted her head. Wide-open eyes, sparkling green as a tropical sea, stared at Kazuya.

“Elementary, my dear Kujou. The Wellspring of Wisdom within me said so. My heightened senses gather fragments of chaos from the world around me. The Wellspring of Wisdom then toys with them to stave off my boredom, reconstructing them. If I feel like it, I may even verbalize them so that a simpleton like you can understand. It’s often too much trouble, though. Do you understand?”

“There you go again, calling me a simpleton and whatnot.”

“What, I can’t?” Victorique sounded genuinely curious. Her emerald eyes flickered.

Kazuya sighed. “Never mind. I’m already used to it.”

“That won’t do. Acclimation is the death of intelligence. Reflect on that.”

“Reflect? Who, me? I highly doubt I’m the one who needs to do some reflection.”

Kazuya was mad, but he couldn’t really stay furious.

Normally, Kazuya would never allow anyone to call him, a bright man representing his country, a simpleton, but when this eccentric, crazy little girl who had never attended class—yet somehow able to skim through difficult books with ease—said it, he couldn’t say anything back.

Even now, he still didn’t know much about Victorique. Some said she was the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman. Her family feared her so they sent her to this school because they didn’t want her staying in the house. Her mother was a famous dancer who went crazy. She was the reincarnation of the legendary gray wolf. The school rumors were often dubious, like most horror stories.

Kazuya himself had never asked Victorique about her personal life. Partly because he thought asking such questions was distasteful, and partly because Victorique, despite her petite frame and dignified demeanor, emitted a ferocious aura that intimidated those around her.

Several months had passed since he’d met her, months spent trying to get close to this tiny, wild critter. Kazuya often found himself wondering why he was even doing all this, but like he always did, he climbed the maze-like stairs again today just for this odd girl. Such was his exchange student life so far.

“By the way, Victorique,” Kazuya said, keeping his spirits up. “I had some business in the village.”

Victorique was absorbed in her reading, chewing on a whiskey bonbon. “You went to the post office to get your mail, no?”

“Yeah. I actually asked my family to send me a certain book, but I don’t think they received my letter in time. I got some allowance from my eldest brother instead. He wanted to share a little of his first paycheck as a scholar.”

“Ahuh.”

“So, since I got some extra cash, I got you this.” Kazuya confidently presented the Indian turban.

Victorique raised her head, and after casting a weary glance at the headdress, she turned her gaze back to the book. A second later, her eyes darted back to it. “What is that?!”

“It’s a hat. What else would it be?”

“That’s a hat?!”

An unexpected bite. Kazuya was disappointed at her reaction, however. She was shocked, not delighted.

“...Is it weird?” he asked.

“It is!”

“I-I see... I’ll just return it, then, if you don’t want it.”

Dejected, Kazuya reached for the turban, when Victorique spun around, snatched it away, and whirled back to her original position. She placed the turban on the floor opposite from Kazuya, hiding it with her own body.

Kazuya looked at her curiously. “Do you want it?”

“I just said it was weird. I never said I didn’t want it.”

“But if it’s weird, I’ll have it exchanged with something you’ll like. I knew I should have gotten a lace collar or a pretty ring. I think I got tricked. That nun *did* look like she had a few screws loose...”

Victorique was hunched over, eagerly fiddling with the turban. She looked like a cat playing with a new toy, adorable in a way, but after a while, she tossed the turban aside.

“I’m sick of it.”

“Now, listen here. You don’t play with hats. You wear them. You haven’t even tried it on yet.”

“I’m bored.”

“So... Wait, you’re bored? Did you *really* say bored?”

Sensing trouble, Kazuya rose to his feet, ready to run away. “I gotta head back to the dorm...”

Victorique cast him a sidelong glance, and before he could walk away, pulled on his pants.

Kazuya fell hard and slammed his face on the floor. “Ouch!”

“I said I’m bored.”

“And I heard you! What do you want me to do about it? Oh, right!” He bolted upright. “I totally forgot about the other souvenir. While I was buying the turban, a strange incident occurred. A theft.”

After purchasing the turban, Kazuya turned to leave, when the nun running the bazaar recommended a small music box. As soon as Avril picked it up, the music box broke apart and a pigeon flew out from inside. While everyone was looking at it, the expensive plate on display at the bazaar vanished into thin air.

The police officers who rushed to the scene performed a body check on all the shoppers present, including Kazuya and Avril. The nun was frantic, but the plate was never found.

Thanks to the commotion, Kazuya and Avril returned late, past the school's curfew, and had to stand in front of the closed iron gate for a while.

While Kazuya was explaining the situation, Avril pulled him away and led him to a hidden hole through the hedge.

After breaking curfew again last week, Avril used a hatchet to chop a couple of the hedge's sturdy branches just in case.

“We shouldn’t do this,” he had said, but returned to the campus through the hole anyway.

That’s why there was a leaf on Kazuya’s head from a tree not found in the academy.

“Sounds really strange, doesn’t it?” Kazuya said. “The music box was the size of the palm of my hand, not big enough to hide a pigeon inside. But as soon as it broke apart, a white pigeon flew out. At the same time, the expensive plate disappeared. No one in the area left in a hurry, but it was nowhere to be found.”

“...Is that it?” Victorique yawned loudly.

Kazuya blinked. She stretched and fiddled with the hat again.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s only one culprit, Kujou. They were right beside you.”

“Huh?”

“What a simple fragment. I wouldn’t even call it chaos. Ah, I’m bored. I think I might die. That’s how terribly boring it is, you dolt.”

Kazuya was a little pissed. “Then why don’t you wear that hat?”

“Hmm.”

Victorique wore the turban like a crown, her long, golden hair hanging down her back. It was just the right size for her small head. She looked like a princess from a faraway desert country.

Kazuya was wondering whether to compliment her or not, when he heard footsteps from far below. Big feet in leather shoes. As he looked down the railing, his eyes met with the person standing on the first floor's hall.

Kazuya turned to Victorique. "Guess who's back."

"...Hmm? She frowned a little.

Clang! Clang Clang!

The hydraulic elevator started to move.

Victorique shifted a bit.

Clank!

The steel cage made a loud noise and stopped in a small elevator hall in front of the conservatory. A young man was standing inside.

The cage squealed open, revealing a man with a weird hairdo striking a pose, one arm stretched upward, and the other on his waist.

He wore a classy three-piece suit with a fancy ascot. Silver cuffs gleamed on his wrists. He would've been hands-down dashing if it weren't for the weird hairstyle. The tip of his bright blond hair was shaped like a drill, making him look like a human weapon.

"He's probably here to ask you about the case I just told you about," Kazuya whispered.

Victorique yawned once more, seemingly uninterested.

The man—Inspector Grevil de Blois—sauntered in, his leather boots clicking. Victorique's half-brother, he became a police detective by using his noble status.

He turned to Kazuya and Victorique, and with utmost confidence said, "I wanted to talk to you guys about something..." He shut his mouth.

His face slowly turned pale. His mouth was agape, his eyes wide open, and his fingertips trembled as though he had seen a ghost.

Astonished, Kazuya looked around. There was Kazuya, his little friend Victorique—still wearing the turban—a pile of books, candies, and a conservatory.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to elicit such a reaction.

Inspector Blois was white as a sheet, his mouth flapping open and shut, but he eventually managed to speak. "Cordelia... Gallo?! What are you doing here...?"

"It's just me, Grevil." Victorique said calmly. She removed the turban, and her silky, golden hair cascaded down.

Inspector Blois' pale face gradually turned red with anger. "I-I just got confused!" he barked, irritated that he shouted out of fear.

"Who's Cordelia Gallo?" Kazuya asked.

The two siblings, who looked nothing alike, ignored Kazuya's question. Kazuya hung his head. "Fine. I won't ask. Tsk."

Not paying any attention to Kazuya, Victorique smoked her pipe.

Inspector Blois also took out a pipe and lit it. Two wisps of smoke slowly rose toward the skylight.

A while later, Inspector Blois began to speak.

The light streaming through the garden's skylight slowly waned as clouds drifted in and blocked the sun. A brief moment later, the sun came out again, softer than before, shining on the three. A gentle breeze blew past, rustling the large, thick, tropical leaves a few times.

"So, the Dresden Plate on display at the church bazaar vanished into thin air," the inspector said, staring straight at Kazuya. "The police searched the shoppers, but they couldn't find anything. The plate was about the size of a man's head. It wasn't something that you could easily hide in your clothes."

"I know that. I was there," Kazuya murmured. "Why don't you ever look at Victorique?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I only came here to ask you, a witness, some questions. It seems there's someone else here, but I can't really see them. Now, then..."

Inspector Blois sat back down with his left ear pointed in Victorique's direction so he could hear her. His pointy hair glittered gold under the light of the sun.

Victorique continued reading. A glimpse of the book's title indicated that it was the same book she had mentioned earlier, a history of Eastern Europe from ancient times to the Middle Ages, written in dense and fine letters. She was leafing through the pages swiftly.

She looked up and yawned, seemingly bored out of her mind. "Like I said, Kujou, the culprit was someone right beside you."

"Who?" Kazuya asked curiously.

Inspector Blois leaned forward, pushing him away. "I get it. It's the foreign exchange student!"

“Why would Kujou’s companion steal the plate? And she was searched along with him. There was one other person beside Kujou. The only one who wasn’t searched. Think.”

She buried her face back into her book. Kazuya and Inspector Blois looked at each other, and racked their brains.

“One other person... You mean the nun?” Kazuya said.

“Yes.” Victorique nodded. She returned to her world of books, like she had forgotten about the two.

A few seconds of silence passed. Victorique, smoking her pipe, lifted her gaze.

Kazuya and Inspector Blois looked as if they wanted to say something, and were waiting for Victorique to notice them. Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth, picked up a macaroon lying on the floor with her other hand, peeled off the wrapper, tossed it into her small mouth, munched on it, took a breath, and said, “Why are you staring at me?”

“We’re waiting for you to verbalize your reasoning.”

“You don’t get it!?” Victorique regarded them with a look of pure astonishment.

She put the pipe back in her mouth, took a drag, then pulled it away again. After exhaling a puff of smoke, she reached for another macaroon and tossed it in her mouth, munching away. “You two are really stupid.”

“What did you say!?” Kazuya snapped.

Victorique’s eyes widened in shock. Inspector Blois’ face turned violet with anger, and he fell silent.

“The nun is the only person who could have stolen the plate,” Victorique said. “At least, going by what you’ve told me, Kujou. Listen carefully. As soon as your companion picked up the small music box at the nun’s suggestion, it broke apart. It was designed that way. At the same time, a white pigeon flew out from inside, drawing the attention of all the villagers in the square. But the pigeon did not actually come out of the music box.”

“What do you mean?”

“It came out from under the nun’s skirt.”

“H-Her skirt?”

“Kujou, you said it yourself. A nun, who’s supposed to be proper and modest, was sitting with her legs spread like a man. You found it odd. There was a reason for that. She was hiding something between her legs.”

Kazuya recalled the scene that day. The nun sitting with her legs spread open. Her body garbed in a stuffy navy blue nun's habit, long enough to cover even her feet.

"She probably prepared some kind of container between her legs and put the pigeon inside. The moment a shopper came and picked up the music box, she would lift up her skirt and release the pigeon. If they timed it right as the music box exploded, it would look like the pigeon came from inside. While the villagers were distracted by the pigeon, she would hide the plate in her skirt, then scream that the plate was gone."

Kazuya, astounded, glanced back and forth between Victorique and Inspector Blois.

"But the nun's the one running the bazaar," he said. "Why would she steal her own goods?"

"You'll have to ask her that. You mentioned that she reeked of alcohol. Sounds like there's more to her than meets the eye. Besides, the items sold at a bazaar are the property of the church, and the proceeds of the sale would not go to her. Including her in the list of suspects makes sense. And..."

"Yeah?"

"Her habit and shoes need to be examined thoroughly. You said that her black leather shoes had white stains. Those were probably droppings from the pigeon she hid under her skirt. How would pigeon droppings get on her shoes that were supposed to be hidden by her long habit? I doubt she would have a convincing explanation."

Victorique gave a weary yawn, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She stretched, then returned to the world of books.

Kazuya cast Inspector Blois a sidelong glance. Usually, he'd scurry out of there as soon as he learned the truth, but for some reason, he was deep in thought, arms folded and wearing a stern expression.

"Inspector? Is something wrong?" Kazuya asked.

"Darn it."

"Huh?"

"Oh, it's nothing!" The Inspector rose to his feet and walked toward the elevator.

He looked over his shoulder once, looking like he had something to say, but he kept his mouth shut and entered the metal cage.

“Inspector?”

“...”

Clang! Clang Clang! The elevator descended.

Inspector Blois' quick footsteps on the ground floor gradually faded.

Once it was quiet, Kazuya turned to Victorique.

“By the way...”

“...Hmm?”

“Who's Cordelia Gallo? Why was the Inspector so surprised?”

“...”

Victorique turned her back on him and buried her face into her book.

Kazuya clicked his tongue, picked up a macaroon, and popped it into his mouth.

The sun was slowly going down. The wind had stopped blowing, the leaves quiet and still once more.

A thin wisp of white smoke rose from Victorique's pipe to the skylight.

A heavenly tranquility blanketed the conservatory, as it had for the past three hundred years.

The next morning.

Kazuya woke up in his dorm room right on time.

The boys' dormitory was specifically designed for the children of nobility, each individual room luxurious and comfortable. Desks and beds made of fine mahogany. Closets with beautifully-embroidered curtains. Pitchers made of polished brass. Floors covered with soft and fluffy carpets.

Only one boy occupied each room, so they were usually a little messy, but Kazuya's room was always neat and tidy, and if there was even a speck of dust, he would pick it up and throw it in the trash.

That morning, Kazuya woke up, washed his face, changed his clothes, organized his bag, straightened his back, and went down to the dining hall on the first floor. Since most of the other male students were asleep until the last minute, he was usually the only one—at most there would be three of them—there.

The sexy, red-haired dorm mother was sitting cross-legged on a wooden chair in the corner. She was reading the morning paper, holding a cigarette in her mouth with a frown.

When she saw Kazuya, she got up and served him a breakfast of bread, fruit, and lightly-sauteed ham. Kazuya thanked her, and started eating, stealing glances at her all the while. When she noticed, she asked, "Wanna read it?" and handed him the paper.

Kazuya read the morning paper from cover to cover as he ate his breakfast. "Huh? Something's not right." He looked puzzled.

Just yesterday, Victorique solved the mystery of the Dresden Plate theft. Inspector Blois usually took credit for solving the crime as soon as he learned who the culprit was. But this case was different.

The Great Inspector Blois Admits Defeat! The Missing Dresden Plate Nowhere to be Found.

They clearly had not caught the nun.

"That's odd. He usually arrests the culprit right away and the next morning's paper is filled with praise for him. What's going on here?"

Now that he thought about it, Inspector Blois was acting a little strange before he left yesterday. His face was pale, he was unusually quiet, and he looked like he had something to say.

"Hey, Kujou."

Kazuya looked up and saw the dorm mother beckoning him over.

"Yes?"

"You know the classified ads at the bottom of the morning paper? I always love reading that section."

"Why is that?"

"Because it's interesting. There's ads addressed to runaway girls, job hunts, and every once in a while there's a questionable ad that smacks of crime. And today..." She pointed at the ad section.

Kazuya scanned the content, and inclined his head. It read...

Descendants of the Gray Wolves.

Midsummer Feast is near. We welcome you all with open arms.

It was followed by a brief description of the route to a small town called Horovitz, near the border with Switzerland.

"What is this?" Kazuya asked.

"I have no idea. But the Gray Wolves are a popular stuff of legend in Sauville. You know how different countries have their own folklore, like vampires and the Yeti. In Sauville, it's said that silent Gray Wolves live deep in the elm-covered mountains."

“They say that Gray Wolves are way smarter than humans,” she eagerly added. “So when a child that was too smart was born, the mother would be accused of bearing the child of a wolf and kicked out of the village. Well, that was a long time ago.”

“Hmm...”

Kazuya remembered the story about Victorique being the reincarnation of a Gray Wolf. He had always wondered why they called her that, and now his questions were answered, if only a little.

It's because she's too smart.

“Oh, morning!” The dorm mother looked up. Noble children who woke up later were coming down the dining area.

As soon as they spotted Kazuya, they cast their eyes downward and silently sat down far away from him. Kazuya had gotten used to it. He stood up, not paying them any attention.

Casting a sideways glance at the dorm mother serving food to the students, he left the dining hall. As he walked down the corridor, he remembered the advertisement.

“Maybe it’ll help kill her boredom,” he mumbled to himself, then returned to the dining hall. “Can I borrow the paper?”

“You can have it,” the dorm mother said. “I’ve already read it.”

“Thank you.”

Tucking the paper under his arm, Kazuya left.

Kazuya stepped out of the dormitory, straightened his back, and walked down the path to the main school building. Along the way, he spotted his homeroom teacher, Ms. Cecile, standing on the lawn, her head slightly tilted to the side.

A brunette with a petite frame and shoulder-length hair, she wore large round glasses, and had a somewhat childish air about her. For some reason, she looked downcast so early in the morning.

“Good morning, Teach.”

“Oh, Kujou.” She smiled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uhm... well...”

Ms. Cecile pointed to some trees beyond the lawn, toward the tall hedge that separated the campus grounds from the outside.

“There were beautiful violets blooming in that area, but it looks like someone stepped on them yesterday. It’s a shame. Why would anyone go through there? There’s no path or anything. There’s just a hedge beyond that.”

“Yeah... Huh?”



Kazuya held his tongue. *Oh, crap.*

He was in the area yesterday when he and Avril sneaked in through a hole in the hedge after being late for curfew. Maybe they were the ones who stepped on the flowers.

Not noticing his ashen face, Ms. Cecile walked away, crestfallen.

Noon.

After quickly finishing his lunch in the school's vast cafeteria, where sunlight poured in through the mosaic glass ceiling, he got up. Avril, slicing her bread, spotted him. She followed him with her gaze, wondering where he was going.

Kazuya headed for the library on the outskirts of the campus. The wind was stronger than yesterday. It made for a chilly weather, despite summer fast approaching.

Not a single student was hurrying away from the school building at this hour. Kazuya hunched his shoulders as he stumped down the empty, narrow gravel path.

“Victorique?” he called as he climbed the narrow, wooden stairs, fully knowing that she wouldn’t answer.

Up... Still going up.

When he finally made it to the top, Victorique was there as always, with several large leather-bound books spread in a circle around her. She was sitting... no, today she was lying on her stomach, elbows propped on the floor, her puffy cheek sitting on her small palm. She held a ceramic pipe on her other hand as usual, bringing it to her mouth and smoking it.

“You’ll get your clothes dirty lying around like that.”

“Was there an article in the paper that caught your attention?”

Kazuya opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking. Wondering how she knew everything, he plopped down beside Victorique.

“Ow!”

His butt crushed something round and hard. He jumped up. It was candy that Victorique had left scattered all over the floor. A macaroon sprinkled with cocoa powder.

“Another mess,” Kazuya said wearily. “Why don’t you get a jar or something? I sat on one of your candies.”

Victorique looked up. Her emerald eyes grew wide in shock.
“Aaaaaahhh! My macaroon!”

“Crushed into smithereens. I’m throwing it out.”

“No. Be responsible and eat it.”

“Come on. It’s practically powder.”

“Kujou...” She stared at him for several seconds. “Eat it.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

Kazuya reluctantly brought the crushed macaroon into his mouth.

Chewing, he sat back down beside Victorique and showed her the morning paper he got from the dorm mother. She kept her face in her book, not sparing him a glance.

“Inspector Blois had not solved the Dresden Plate theft,” he said.

“...Ahuh.”

“Aren’t you surprised?”

“It looked like there was more to the case. But I didn’t want to get too involved with the men of the Blois family.”

“Huh...”

“They all have weird hairdos.”

“...All of them?!”

Victorique raised her head and yawned loudly. “It’s probably genetic.”

“That’s not how genetics work. Besides, your hair is normal.”

“I have my mother’s genes.”

“Hmm...” Kazuya nodded.

With a distant look, he thought about the family that he had left behind in a faraway island country across the ocean. His father was a soldier and a strict man who always did the right thing, a man among men. His two older brothers were like their father, men of high caliber, perhaps too high for his taste as to be a little rough around the edges. His mother, on the other hand, was a gentle and kind woman, and his sister, who was two years older than him, was as lovely as his mother. Sometimes he wondered why he didn’t take after his father, despite being a boy, but he never said it out loud because it seemed like he was forsaking his beloved mother and sister.

“...I guess I take after my mother too,” he mumbled.

There was no reply. Kazuya glanced at Victorique. She removed the pipe from her mouth and stretched in the manner of cats. He did not expect her small body to extend as much as it did.

“Did you come here to tell me about Grevil?” she asked.

“Well, there’s that too.”

“You seem to have taken a liking to my pumpkin-headed brother. You’re monitoring his every move.”

“It’s the exact opposite! I *dislike* him.”

“I know. I was joking. I like it when you get mad. It’s entertaining. When it comes to Grevil, you have a very low boiling point. I find it very strange, and a little amusing at the same time.”

“So, sue me.” He stretched his knees, then opened the paper to the page with the classified ad and showed it to Victorique.

She gave the ad a tired, cursory glance, then bolted upright. She snatched the paper from Kazuya’s hand and brought her face so close that her eyelashes almost touched it. From left to right her head moved, over and over.

“Descendants of the Gray Wolves... Midsummer Feast is near...”

“Weird, huh? The dorm mother says the classified ads range from message to runaways, job hunts, to mysterious ones that reek of crime. This one is particularly cryptic. You said you were bored, so I got you a mystery to... What’s wrong?”

Abruptly Victorique rose to her feet. She moved like a puppet that had its spring wound. Her face was pale, not as pale as Inspector Blois’ yesterday, but enough to see that she was agitated.

“...Is something wrong?”

Victorique was about to break into a run, when she tripped over Kazuya’s leg and fell flat on the floor with a loud thud. Kazuya could see the soles of her small, buttoned leather boots. Her white, frilled petticoat and embroidered bloomers bounced up for a moment before slowly settling back down on her body.

“Victorique?”

“...”

The silence stretched for a while.

Victorique sprang upright. She didn’t say anything.

Kazuya peered into her face. “Are you okay?”

She held her face with her small hands. “It hurts.”

“I can imagine. That was quite the sound.”

“It hurts.”

“Ahuh.”

“I said it hurts!”

“Don’t take it out on me. You tripped on your own.” For once, Kazuya had the high ground, so while he was concerned, his voice was tinged with joy. “Seriously... Are you all right? Come on, get up. Where were you going anyway?”

“I was trying to get the book that’s on the shelf on the right side, seventh rack from the top, thirty-first volume to the right. Kujou, go fetch it.”

“Me?”

“It’s a thick, riveted book with a brown leather cover.”

“...Fine.”

Victorique was still cupping her face, so Kazuya reluctantly went a little down the stairs and reached for the book that she asked for. The wooden staircase swayed precariously with his every movement.

Victorique came down, and with her boot, kicked Kazuya from behind. For such a ferocious move, there wasn’t much power in it, as though a mere child had pushed him, but being in a perilous position, Kazuya lost his balance and almost fell.

He tumbled down the stairs. “Wh-What the hell was that for?!”

Victorique scoffed. “I suggest you be careful as well.”

“You kicked me on purpose!”

Wrapped in a tempestuous atmosphere, the two returned to the conservatory. Victorique set the book down before her. Flipping through the pages in a familiar manner, she tossed a macaroon into her mouth and threw the wrapper aside. Kazuya quickly picked it up and shoved it in his pocket.

“Since Sauville’s olden days, there’s been one particular supernatural tale that’s prevalent the deeper you go into the mountains. I’m sure you’ve heard of it. It’s the story of the Gray Wolves.”

Kazuya nodded.

“Most of the tales are entirely made-up, but there is one credible source. The diary of an English traveler, written in the sixteenth century. I’ve been thinking about this account for a long time.”

Victorique showed Kazuya the book. He peeked at it gingerly, fearing it was written in Latin or Greek, but fortunately it was in English. Confused by the old turn of phrases, Kazuya struggled to read the account.

It was the year 1511. I was lost in the mountains near the border between Sauville and Switzerland. I had not hired a guide, my compass was out of order, and I wandered aimlessly through the dark forest. Night came. Fearing the presence of beasts, I built a fire. Wild animals are afraid of fire. It was almost midnight when “he” appeared.

It was a young male wolf. A wolf with a silvery gray coat. Unlike other animals, he was not afraid of fire. He stepped on the fallen leaves and approached slowly.

Just when I prepared myself for the worst, something amazing happened.

The wolf opened its mouth, revealing a crimson tongue. But he wasn’t trying to eat me.

He was trying to talk.

The Gray Wolf was quiet, with an intelligence and calmness far beyond his age. Perhaps he had very few people to talk to, being deep in the mountains. He asked me questions, and I answered. Questions about the profound mysteries of this world, and the history of man and beast. Before I knew it, dawn was breaking, and he showed me the way out of the forest.

When we parted, I made a promise to the Gray Wolf.

“I will never tell anyone that I met a wolf who speaks human tongue.”

But I couldn’t keep my promise. When I returned safely, I couldn’t resist telling my wife, who told her brother. Eventually, it reached the ears of government officials, and they questioned me in detail about the place. They made me promise the same thing.

“Never speak of it.”

A year later, I visited the same mountains.

When I reached the place where I met the Gray Wolf, I found a small village nearby. I failed to notice it a year ago because it was nighttime. But the village was uninhabited. It had been burned to the ground, abandoned.

The faces of the government officials flashed through my mind. Was it my fault for breaking my word?

I called out to the young male wolf.

There was no answer.

Then, I heard the crunch of fallen leaves.

I turned around and saw a silhouette disappearing into the depths of the forest. Through the trees, I glimpsed the color gray.

Howls rose in the distance, howls of countless wolves. I quickly descended the mountain. Suddenly I felt terrified. Terrified of the sin I've committed. But as I ran, all I could think about was one thing.

They were alive. They had escaped.

They were still in the mountains...

Kazuya managed to read the whole page. He took a deep breath and faced Victorique. "I'm done."

Victorique looked stunned. "You just finished reading?"

"Well, I apologize for not being able to read as fast as you."

"Your mediocrity amazes me. I thought you fell asleep with your eyes open."

His brows furrowed. "Ugh... darn it..."

Paying no heed to Kazuya, Victorique took the book. "There used to be many folktales involving wolves in this kingdom," she began, flipping through the pages. "Not the bloody kind, with man-eating wolves and werewolves who hunt people on moonlit nights. I'm talking about The Silent Gray Wolf, The Furry Philosopher, and so on. There are various theories about this. In my opinion, there are many things that can only be understood once you leave this kingdom and think with a broader perspective. So anyway, the problem is that legends involving the wolves began in recent centuries. If you read books from the 13th century, for example, you will find no mention of them. In other words..."

Kazuya stared blankly at Victorique as she continued talking. He couldn't understand a word she was saying, so he was getting bored.

Speaking of which...

Suddenly, he recalled Victorique's fall earlier. She kept saying it hurt.

I wonder... Is she sensitive to pain? I guess everyone hates pain, but she was acting like it was the end of the world or something.

Remembering the momentary high ground he had earlier, Kazuya smiled.

“What’s the matter?” Victorique asked. “You’re creeping me out.”

“Can you turn to me for a sec?”

“Hmm?”

Kazuya lightly flicked Victorique’s wise and brilliant white forehead, and chuckled. He meant it as a joke. He made sure that it didn’t hurt, but for some reason, tears began forming in her emerald eyes.

“Ahaha. I got you, didn’t I? Uh... V-Victorique?!”

“I-It hurts.”

“No way. It was just a light flick. You’re overreacting.”

“It hurts.”

“That can’t be right.”

Shielding her forehead with her small hands, Victorique backed away. She looked baffled and frightened, as though she were a small cat that had been suddenly kicked by her caring owner.

“Why are you looking at me like that?!”

“Kujou, I never thought you were that kind of man.”

“Huh? F-Fine. I apologize. I’m sorry, okay? Did it really hurt that bad? But... Okay, I’m sorry.”

“I will never speak to you ever again. We’re done!”

“You’re kidding, right?”

For a while, Kazuya chuckled at Victorique’s overreaction, but then he realized that no matter how much he tried to talk to her, she didn’t respond, completely ignoring him as if he wasn’t there. It made him sad at first and then angry.

This is just like Inspector Blois ignoring Victorique. I get it. If they don’t like someone, they ignore them.

Kazuya stood up, indignant. “If there’s anyone who’s being mean here, it’s you. I gave a proper apology, but your ego’s too big. Fine. I don’t care anymore.”

Victorique did not say anything back. Smoking her pipe, she immersed herself in her book as if there was no one else around.

“So you care more about your books than me.”

“...”

“Fine. I’m never coming back.”

“...”

“I mean it. I’m never, ever coming to the library again... you... you crybaby!” Leaving the newspaper behind, Kazuya shuffled down the narrow wooden staircase.

Down... Down he went...

Still going down.

He almost tumbled.

When he finally made it down to the hall on the first floor, he looked up at the ceiling regretfully. He glimpsed a small face looking down, but it disappeared the next moment.

“Seriously... What’s her deal?” Kazuya mumbled. “I’m never coming back.”

An iron bell rang in the distance, signaling the start of afternoon classes.

“I really mean it...”

When he opened the heavy door, he was greeted by warm sunlight and the chirping of birds. Kazuya left the library dejected. The doors slowly closed behind him. Filled with the smell of dust, and dirt, and intelligence, the library was blanketed in a dignified and tranquil atmosphere once more.

It was utterly quiet.

St. Marguerite Academy at night was wrapped in dead stillness, as though the world had ended. The school building and dormitories stood quietly as if deserted, surrounded by a thickly-forested garden, the trees casting dark shadows on the ground. From time to time, pale moonlight filtered through the branches and leaves, only to be blocked out by clouds, leaving only a profound darkness.

At this time of night—it was only a little past seven, not exactly late—the students were studying in their rooms. The dormitory leader, a senior student, made regular rounds through the rooms of the underclassmen, while the housemaster, a school staff, monitored the comings and goings of students from their office at the entrance.

The dormitory leader, perhaps fearful of the rumors of the Reaper, usually passed by Kazuya’s room without checking inside. Not that there was any need to check on him. He always had his thick textbooks open to review the day’s lessons and prepare for the next day. He also studied

English and French and Latin—*especially* Latin, which he was not very good at.

That night, Kazuya was studying at his desk by the window, mumbling Latin words to himself.

The wall-mounted gas lamp flickered.

Textbooks and stationery were lined up neatly on the thick desk. Kazuya's face was the very picture of seriousness.

"Hmm?"

He lifted his head for a moment, but before he could turn his eyes back to his textbook, a puzzled expression flashed across his face, and he looked out the window again. Peered at the darkness outside.

The gobelin curtains were open to let the moonlight in, and the French windows were ajar.

He thought he saw something moving slowly along the dark pathway outside.

What?!

A little spooked, Kazuya opened the French window wide and peered down outside.

From his small room at the end of the second floor, he had a good, albeit distant, view of the grass-covered grounds and the dimly-lit pathway that meandered through the trees.

Whatever it was he saw was crawling very slowly along the path.

It was a huge suitcase.

A large travel suitcase was moving slowly despite there being no one pulling on it. It moved about ten centimeters forward, stopped for a few seconds, and then moved another ten centimeters or so. It repeated this over and over.

The pathway was in the far distance, and the light provided by the moon was faint, but with everything else completely still, the bizarre lumbering suitcase stood out like a sore thumb.

The suitcase is moving on its own?

It seemed to be heading in the direction of the academy's main gate.

Kazuya just stood there for a while, stunned. A moment later, he snapped back to his senses. He tossed aside his textbook and pencil, and stood up.

He carefully reached for the thick tree branch leaning against the window. He was never good at climbing trees, but when he was younger, his boorish older brothers used to laugh at him when they left him up trees or drifting in the river. They weren't tormenting him on purpose—no, there was no malice in their actions. It was just their way of having fun with their younger brother, albeit in a rough manner. They believed that boys liked to climb trees and play in the river.

With the skills he was forced to develop in those days, Kazuya deftly slid down the tree trunk.

There was only one thing on his mind. *A mystery... A moving suitcase under the moonlight!* He meant to share this matter to his peculiar friend, Victorique, as a gift.

Kazuya swung down from branch to branch, and, though a little scared, jumped the last two meters to the ground.

Whoosh! The branches shook wildly.

He rose to his feet and walked across the lawn, careful not to make a sound. Slowly, he approached the dark pathway.

The suitcase was still slowly but surely moving somewhere.

Kazuya was thrilled. He was looking forward to going back up the library and telling Victorique about this mystery.

He went around the suitcase to get a better look, but as the angle changed, he saw something that brought a baffled look to his face. Eventually, his puzzled expression turned into one of exasperation.

On the other side of the suitcase were small feet, clad in lacy leather shoes. The fringes on the hem of her elegant dress swayed slightly as she moved, and the velvet ribbon on her hat flapped in the night breeze.

Is that Victorique?

“You there,” Kazuya called from the lawn. “What are you doing?”

The suitcase stopped abruptly.

The sudden male voice startled Victorique. Kazuya peered further into the other side of the suitcase. She was pushing the huge bag with her small hands.

When Victorique refused to answer, Kazuya dashed across the grass to the pathway. As he neared, he saw that the trunk was very large. It looked like it could fit both him and Victorique inside.

“What are you doing?” Kazuya asked once more.

“Uhm...”

Victorique was about to say something, but she clamped her mouth shut. Feigning ignorance, she resumed pushing on the suitcase.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“...”

“Victorique?”

“...”

“You said you weren’t allowed to leave the academy without permission. Besides, the main gate is locked.”

It goes without saying that students of St. Marguerite Academy were not allowed to go out after curfew. The gates were locked shut. If they went out without permission, they would be banned from going out on weekends for a while, and the academy might even report them to their parents.

As for Victorique...

Kazuya was not privy to the exact details, but she could not leave the academy. The one time she was allowed to, Grevil de Blois asked for some kind of special permission and had to accompany her.

“...”

Victorique did not answer Kazuya.

The suitcase was slowly moving toward the main gate at a speed of fifteen centimeters per minute.

“Wh-Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Victorique whirled around, astonished. Her face was twisted in disbelief.

“Wh-What is it?” Kazuya asked dubiously.

“Hmm...!”

“You can’t talk? Oh, I get it. Cavities.”

“Hmm...?!” She looked frustrated.

“Both your cheeks are all puffed up.”

Victorique furrowed her brows and clenched her teeth as if to say her cheeks have always been that way.

“Are you going to the dentist?” Kazuya asked, oblivious to the aura she was emitting. “You don’t need this much, then. Can you open it? Whoa, what’s all this stuff? A change of clothes, a big mirror, a chair?! A tea set for ten people, a vase big enough for you to fit in, and... is this a cot?! Where on earth are you going? Are you moving overseas or something? Your luggage is bigger than last time. You’re such a handful.”

He began reducing her luggage. Victorique flailed about in silent protest. He went on anyway. “If you have a toothache, you gotta stay put.”
“Hmm?!”

Tears welled up in the corner of her eyes as she held her puffed-out cheeks.

A while later.

“Remember. As soon as your appointment’s done, we’re going home straight away. Also, make sure you keep this hole a secret. Otherwise, Avril... the student who made it will get into trouble.”

With one hand carrying Victorique’s mini-suitcase—now with the reduced luggage inside—and the other holding her hand as she flailed to free herself, Kazuya headed for the hole in the hedge that Avril had told him about.

After hiding Victorique’s excess luggage in the shrubs, Kazuya went back to his room to get his wallet and jacket and returned to show her the way.

He glanced back at Victorique. She wasn’t looking very happy.

“Oh, shoot. I forgot!”

Victorique’s face lit up, thinking he had finally remembered.

Kazuya pointed to the ground. Beside the small laced leather shoes were violet buds glistening in the night dew, swaying softly.

“Try not to step on the flowers. Ms. Cecile will be sad.”

Victorique looked a little despondent.

Once outside the academy, Kazuya held Victorique’s small hand tightly so she wouldn’t wander off somewhere. Her luggage was surprisingly heavy, but this brilliant and sharp-tongued girl, who had rarely gone outside of the academy, could end up getting lost if left alone. She might cry because she doesn’t know how to commute, or fall into an old well or an animal pit, unable to climb back up.

The various scenarios made Kazuya pale. He squeezed her hand even more tightly.

As if to disregard his concern, Victorique swung her hand around wildly—upwards, downwards, to the right and to the left—in an attempt to break free.

“Ow, my shoulder... You’re dislocating my shoulder!”

“...”

“Where to the dentist?”

“...”

Victorique walked in silence, and Kazuya reluctantly followed.

They eventually arrived at a place they had been before—the only station in the village. The round clock gleaming in the middle of the small triangular roof showed it was past seven thirty.

Kazuya’s eyes widened. “The station?! Are you taking the train? Where on earth are you going? Not the dentist...?”

Victorique entered the station building, completely ignoring him. She shook her hands free to buy a ticket, and told the station clerk her destination in a low voice.

Kazuya pulled on Victorique’s hand. “You can’t go far. They’ll find out you left the academy!”

“...”

“Besides, I only have my wallet with me.”

“...”

“Let’s head back. Seriously, what’s going on with you?”

“...” She broke free from his grip and walked away.

Kazuya quickly told the clerk, “One ticket, please! Same destination as the girl!”

“Are you going to Horovitz?”

“Horovitz...?”

Kazuya nodded swiftly, took the ticket, paid for it, and ran after Victorique. She was already in the middle of the platform.

He quickly caught up with her. “Victorique...”

“...”

“Why?”

Victorique did not answer.

The small station platform shook beneath their feet from the vibration of the oncoming train. Stars were twinkling in the sky above.

Someone else was coming out of the ticket gate and onto the platform.

The black steam locomotive arrived at the station with a plume of smoke.

The conductor disembarked and pulled a brass lever to open the door.

Victorique got on board. Confused, Kazuya followed her inside.

The conductor blew his whistle, and the door slammed shut.

Horovitz... That's the name of the town in the classified ad.

Kazuya recalled the mysterious newspaper ad. It read: **Descendants of the Gray Wolves. Midsummer Feast is near. We welcome you all with open arms.**

There were directions on how to get to Horovitz, a small town near the border with Switzerland. A town at the foot of mountains much further than here... Why would she go there?

Disregarding his worried look, Victorique stayed silent.

As for Kazuya, he showed no sign of remembering why she wasn't talking.

Come to think of it, she turned pale when I showed her the ad. The rumor about Victorique that Avril told me about... Victorique de Blois is a legendary Gray Wolf. Then there was the curious name that Inspector Blois blurted out, Cordelia Gallo. There's so much I don't understand. And Victorique's not talking...

What a mess..

Victorique was sitting on one side of the box seat. Despite her tiny frame, she occupied the whole seat for two with her lace and frills. She stayed still, like a doll on display, only her emerald eyes blinking from time to time.

She looked downcast, less spirited than usual. But her cheeks were still a warm, rosy color, as though she had applied a dab of blush to them.

The door to the compartment suddenly opened, admitting a young woman. Kazuya jumped in surprise.

It was probably the other passenger who entered the station earlier.

"Not a lot of passengers at this time of night," they said. "It feels lonely. Mind if I join you two?"

A slightly husky, but coquettish voice, sweet as lilac perfume. It sounded familiar.

"Not at all," Kazuya said, glancing up.

The person looked surprised. "Oh, it's you."

"Ah, yeah..."

Standing there was a woman garbed in a stuffy nun's habit, with bluish gray eyes that evoked images of dry desert skies.

It was the young nun who stole the Dresden Plate at the bazaar.

Monologue 1

Every night, memories of blood come flooding back to me.

It happened a long time ago, but night after night, I remember the colors, the sounds, the feel, so vividly.

The dagger, with its brass ornaments, buried up to the hilt.

The setting sun burning like flame outside the rough glass window.

The blue velvet curtains rustling faintly in the wind.

The blade gleaming reddish black, protruding from the chest of a man who toppled without so much as a shriek.

How after he drew his last breath, there was an otherworldly silence, a silence so deep and profound.

How I stood there until the sun had sunk completely and darkness blanketed the room.

I remember coming to my senses and returning to my original spot, swallowing the joy slowly welling up inside me.

And that voice. That lovely voice.

I've never seen anything so beautiful!

It was as if it all happened just a few moments ago.

I can't forget.

Are you trapped?

People call us Gray Wolves. But they are wrong.

Wolves do not kill their own kind. Especially not for a reason like that.

Chapter 2: The Squirrel in the Hat Box

A while later, Kazuya and Victorique disembarked at a certain station and transferred to a train heading deep into the mountains.

Using something called the Abt rack system, the locomotive was fitted with cog wheels that meshed with the rack rail, allowing it to climb steep slopes. Unlike the previous train, the interior was very bleak. There were no ornate windows, hanging silk curtains, or other decors. The lights were dimmer, and the temperature a little lower.

Chug, chug.

The train lurched into motion, rocking from side to side. Kazuya could feel the cogs grating against the rail through the floor.

The interior of the car was bathed in a pale light that tinted Victorique's rosy cheeks a faint shade of blue. She was sitting quietly beside Kazuya. The dim light from the bluish-white, wall-mounted lamp fell on the two of them.

The compartment's flimsy door flung open, and a young woman entered.

"Oh, yet another weird coincidence."

It was the same nun from the other train.

"You're here too?" Kazuya said, startled.

"Yeah. Seriously, where are you two headed?"

"I wish I knew," he mumbled to himself, glancing at Victorique.

Victorique remained firmly silent and ignored Kazuya. Whenever he asked her questions, she got more mad, leaving him confused. At first he thought it was because of a toothache, but apparently not. He realized later that her swollen cheeks were not really swollen; they were always puffy to begin with.

The nun plumped herself down in front of them. Kazuya looked uneasy. He had been wanting to tell Victorique about the nun. He couldn't talk about her while she was around, so he planned to bring it up once they had

switched trains. But he didn't expect the nun to board the same train as them again.

Without much of a choice, Kazuya decided to communicate with Victorique using gestures—to tell her that this nun was the culprit behind the Dresden Plate theft.

For some reason, Inspector Blois never apprehended the culprit, and the case was going cold.

Gesturing, Kazuya tried to tell Victorique about the music box that exploded, how it startled everyone, then a pigeon flew from under the nun's skirt, drawing everyone's attention, and then there was a big fuss about the missing plate. She ignored him, turning her back and sticking her face to the window like a child.

It was pitch-black outside. She couldn't possibly see anything.

Kazuya stopped, hanging his head. He glanced at the nun sitting in front of them.

The pale lamplight danced from left to right as the train rocked. Her bluish-gray almond eyes, bright and full of life during the day, now seemed uncanny and empty. Her eyelashes cast long shadows on her freckled white cheeks.

The lamplight flickered on her pale face, shining and dimming. Watching her made Kazuya feel jittery.

"Where in the world are you two going?" the nun suddenly asked. Her bright voice was a sharp contrast to the sinister vibe around her. "It's only mountains from up here."

"...Yeah."

"It's the middle of the night."

"What about you? Where are you headed?"

The nun closed her mouth. She stared at Kazuya. "...What about you?"

"Uhm... We're headed to Horovitz..."

"Really? I'm headed there as well. No wonder we're on the same train."

"Oh... What's your business up there?"

"What about you?"

Kazuya closed his mouth, perplexed. She kept answering his questions with her own questions. After some thought, he said, "Just some stuff. What about you?"

"Well... It's the town I grew up in."

“Really?! What kind of a town is it?”

Regret flickered across her face. She shouldn’t have said that. With a muted click of the tongue, she said, “Just a normal town.” She didn’t say any more.

Victorique glanced at the reflection of the nun’s face on the window. A brief look. The nun noticed and shot Victorique a vicious glare, but she had already returned her gaze back outside the window, her face propped in her hand. After some thought, the nun pulled her eyes away from the little girl.

“My name’s Mildred,” the nun said. “Mildred Arbogast. What’s yours?”

“I’m Kujou. Kazuya Kujou. This is my friend Victorique.”

“Who was that girl with you yesterday?” she asked in a teasing tone.

Kazuya was taken aback. “Yesterday?” he asked back, confused. “Oh, the girl who was with me at the bazaar? Her name’s Avril. We’re in the same class.”

“Speaking of yesterday, what happened after that?” he added. “You know, with the stolen plate.”

“Who knows? It was the last I saw of it.” She sounded disappointed, but there was clear delight on her face. It looked like she would burst into laughter at any moment.

“I wonder who took it...”

“Who, indeed? How did they do it? It’s all a mystery.”

“...”

“Oh, look. We’re almost there.”

Changing the subject, Mildred pointed out the window.

Before they knew it, the train had entered the mountains and was nearing Horovitz station.

The town on the classified ad.

There was only one inn in town.

“Mountain climbers? None here,” the innkeeper said. “The incline’s too steep around these parts. No one climbs further up unless they have a very compelling reason.”

The town was practically deserted. The cobblestone street in front of the inn—the main street, it seemed—was almost devoid of people. A curious,

state-of-the-art German car was parked in front of the inn, its shiny body out-of-place in the town's dreary landscape.

Kazuya was staring at the carcass of a bird hanging on the front door of the run-down inn. It had an arrow sticking out of it. A strong gust blew, ruffling the bird's feathers. Blood was dripping from its wound, forming a small pool on the cobblestone entrance.

The roof of the inn creaked as the wind howled in, carrying a peculiar smell—the smell of wild animals.

"Gonna be a storm tonight," the innkeeper continued. "You should stay inside."

Kazuya turned around. "Why is that?"

"Because wolves come out on nights like this."

"Wolves?"

"Gray Wolves."

Victorique, standing in front of the innkeeper's creaky reception table, abruptly looked up. Noticing her reaction, the innkeeper bent down and brought his face close to hers, like he was trying to frighten a child.

"Gray Wolves live deep in the mountains around here. On windy nights, they come down and hunt people. If you don't want them to devour the flesh off your pretty cheeks, don't leave your room, little girl."

When Victorique showed no sign at all of being scared, the innkeeper hung his head low, dejected.

"There's legends about the Gray Wolves all over the kingdom, huh?" Kazuya said.

"Oh, but they're not just legends here in Horovitz. They're real." He pointed at the door. "That dead bird is there to keep the Gray Wolves away. Apparently, they don't like birds. I don't know if that's true, though. There are wild wolves in the forests around here too, so we have to be careful. But there's a village of real Gray Wolves deep in the mountains. We've lived in fear of them for four hundred years."

Mildred returned from checking the rooms. Footsteps so loud that it was hard to believe they belonged to a woman came clomping down the stairs. Kazuya remembered the time he met the nun at the flea market. Her crude mannerisms left quite the impression on him.

After getting off the train and arriving at Horovitz, it didn't seem like the inn would allow Kazuya and Victorique to check in alone, so they came

here with Mildred. Perhaps the nun's attire proved effective; they were able to check in without being asked any questions.

The innkeeper continued his story as he carried their luggage up the stairs to the second floor. "The village is inhabited by werewolves. They may look gentle, but you must not offend them. They possess extraordinary looks, and are very intelligent, but otherwise, they're an enigma. You must take care not to incur even their slightest wrath."

"You say werewolf... do you mean normal people live in the village?" Kazuya asked.

"They *look* normal, yeah."

They reached the second floor. The dim hallway's parquet flooring squeaked with their every step. The white plaster on the walls was turning a darkish brown color, peeling in places. The faint light from the wall-mounted lamps quivered when the floor shook.

The innkeeper showed them to their respective rooms.

Outside the windows with their old beaded curtains, the night-shrouded mountains seemed to loom over them.

The innkeeper raised his voice. "They look human, but they're not."

"...You're kidding."

"Think about it. Their hair, their skin, living in secret deep in the mountains." His shoulders trembled in horror. "Wavy golden hair, white skin. Rosy cheeks and petite frames. They all look exactly the same. The people of Sauville have various body types and hair colors. Brunette, brown, red. But not them. L-Like..." His eyes darted to his little guest, Victorique, and his face scrunched up. "Yes... The silent Gray Wolves look just like her."

After checking his room, Kazuya peeked into the next room and saw Victorique resting.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Kazuya asked.

When Victorique heard his voice, she spun around, turning her back to him. She was silent.

"What's wrong, Victorique?"

"..."

"Tsk." Baffled, Kazuya closed the door.

What in the world is going on with her? he wondered as he walked down the hallway. She doesn't say a word, she left the academy without explaining anything, and came all the way here. If the teachers found out, there would be a lot of trouble. There's Inspector Blois, too... Victorique's family won't keep quiet about it.

He recalled the time when Victorique was given special permission to go outside the academy. Every experience seemed new to her—riding a train, disembarking at a station, walking down the streets of the big city. There was a reason she could not leave the academy that Kazuya could not fully understand. He remembered the looks of genuine relief on the faces of Inspector Blois' men when they found that she was safe after the ship sank.

What would happen if they found out that Victorique had left the academy without permission, boarded a train, and traveled all the way here?

Why would you come here? What's in that classified ad?

But there was no point in worrying about it now. She would not listen to him. He would have to stick with her until she returned safely to the academy. She might be smart, but she had rarely gone out. Who knows what would happen if he left her to her own devices?

Kazuya quietly descended the stairs. The innkeeper was reading a magazine while sipping on some cheap drink.

“Excuse me,” Kazuya called.

The moment he brought up the classified ad, the innkeeper said in an exasperated tone, “Oh, so you’re also here for that.”

“Well, uhh... Wait, also? There are others?”

“Yeah. See the German car parked out front?”

Kazuya nodded, remembering the luxury automobile parked in front of the inn.

“Three young men were on it. They asked me the same thing. The classified ad piqued their interest, so they traveled all the way here. They seemed to be in it for the fun, so I gave them a warning. Do not go to the Village of the Gray Wolves out of mere curiosity.”

“I see...”

“They just laughed at me the whole time, saying it’s all just superstition.” His voice dropped low, as if talking to himself. “They have no idea the trouble they’re getting into.” The gas lamp dimmed for a moment,

and his lined face darkened. “There will surely be blood. The silent Gray Wolves will not let their curiosity go unpunished.”

The lamp flickered back to life.

“They’re staying on the third floor,” the innkeeper said, his voice bright. “If you’re headed to the same place, you can try talking to them in the morning. They’re idiots, but they’re nice people.”

“Okay...”

“They were excited about driving up the mountain, but the incline’s too steep for cars. You should talk to them about chartering a carriage together.”

“Got it. Can you tell me the name of the village?”

“It doesn’t have one.” The innkeeper’s face contorted, and in a hushed tone, he added, “It’s been that way for the past four hundred years. They don’t give their village a name. No one knows why. It’s what makes it terrifying. We live in constant fear of them.” His voice sounded like a dead man’s.

A chill crawled down Kazuya’s spine. He thanked the innkeeper.

Before he walked away, he remembered something. “That reminds me, where is Mildred’s house? Why is she staying here with us?”

The innkeeper looked up. “You said something?”

“The nun with us said she grew up in this town.”

“...That can’t be right.”

“But...”

“It’s a small town. Everyone remembers the kids who left. Especially if they joined the Church. We’re religious folks around here, you see.”

“...”

“You probably heard wrong. We don’t know her.”

Kazuya bid the innkeeper goodnight and headed back to his room.

As he walked down the first-floor hallway toward the stairs, he saw Mildred coming down the stairs, and stopped. Their eyes met. She gave a start.

The muted lamplight shone faintly on Mildred’s freckled skin and melancholic, bluish-gray eyes.

“What are you wandering around for?” she asked.

“N-Nothing...”

“Go to bed,” she said in a somewhat hard tone, and walked past him.

Kazuya looked over his shoulder.

“Can I borrow your phone?” the nun asked the innkeeper.

“Of course.”

He couldn’t tell who she was calling. He tried straining his ears, but decided that eavesdropping was in bad taste. He turned on his heel and climbed up the stairs.

Kazuya ambled along the second-floor corridor. The parquet flooring creaked with each step he took. The corridor, flanked by white plaster walls, was wide enough for a single person, yet narrow for its high ceiling. It felt suffocating.

His pace quickened.

Each time the floor squeaked, the old glass lamps, installed at equal intervals on either side, flickered. Flickers gradually turned to ripples. Kazuya drew a deep breath and exhaled.

The narrow, high-ceilinged corridor seemed to rock like a ship on sea. He tried to erase the ominous image from his mind.

If this is a ship...

Yet he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

If this is a ship, then huge waves must be rocking it. A sign of a coming storm.

He hurried back to his room. As he turned the corner, his steps now faster than ever, he noticed a large window at the end of the corridor, and stopped.

Outside, steep mountains sliced through the dark night sky with the sharpness of a saw’s teeth. The moon shone softly above.

Kazuya approached the window and opened it. A chilly late-night breeze stirred his hair, bringing in the unpleasant smell of wild animal from somewhere.

A howl rose in the distance.

This smell must be coming from that dead bird on the front door; he thought to himself. Yes, that’s gotta be it. Nothing more.

Clang!

A sound came from behind. He jumped, and looked over his shoulder. Moonlight streaming in through the window gleamed softly on his face.

“Oh, it’s just you.”

Victorique had opened her door and was out in the corridor. She was dressed in a white muslin nightgown. Baggy trousers like women’s work

pants peeked out from under her ruffled nightwear, tied at the bottom with oceanic-blue laces. Half of her hair was tucked under a glossy, satin nightcap.



She rubbed her eyes. “Why do you think the squirrel came out of the hatbox?”

“...What?”

“Just ask the squirrel in squirrel language.”

“Huh?”

“By the way, where are we?”

“Wh-What do you mean?” Kazuya closed the window and scurried toward her. “Victorique? Hello? Earth to Victorique? Wait, are you sleep-talking?”

She continued rubbing her eyes with her little hands, blinking repeatedly. Her emerald eyes, usually wide open, were only half-lidded.

“I’m not. How rude. How dare you accuse a lady of sleep-talking? Anyway, where are we?”

“In an inn in Horovitz.”

“Horovitz?”

“You wanted to come here.”

There was a long silence.

Then Victorique’s face turned a little red. She spun and returned to her room. Kazuya stopped her.

“What is it?” she said.

“Well, uhh... Sorry to disturb your sleep, but...”

“I’m not sleepy. What do you want?”

“Now that you can talk, I got a couple of questions.”

“...Now that I can talk?”

Standing in the corridor, Victorique watched Kazuya’s serious face curiously. Their faces were very close, her faint breathing ticklish on his chin. Victorique’s expression slowly changed. Her green eyes widened. She blinked a few times, and then made a face that said she messed up big-time.

“Ah!”

“Why’d you keep quiet all this time? Toothache?”

“No!”

Victorique stomped back to her room. When Kazuya followed her, objects started flying from inside toward the door—a cushion, a pillow, then a hat, and finally a shoe.

“Whoa! Stop!”

He looked inside, and to his surprise, she was trying to lift a chair this time.

“What are you doing?! What are you so pissed off about?!”

“You don’t enter a lady’s chambers!”

“L-Lady...? Well, I guess you are one...”

Exhausted and breathing hard, Victorique gave up on the chair and plopped down on it. Made of light material, it looked like Kazuya could lift it up and spin it around with Victorique sitting on top of it.

Perplexed, Kazuya entered the room and stood by the door, leaving it slightly open.

Victorique glowered at him. “After all that talk about me caring more about books, you already forgot? You’re such a...” Before she could say any more, she closed her mouth.

The windows rattled. The wind was picking up.

Dark clouds hovered over the mountains outside, and heavy, dark-blue skies blotted out the stars.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Victorique?”

“...I’m done.”

“Done with what?”

“I said I’m done!”

“What’s your problem?!”

Kazuya slammed the wall out of frustration. His fist hurt so much that tears formed in his eyes. He went quiet.

After a few moments of silence, he said, “Why did you come here, Victorique?”

“...”

“It has something to do with the classified ad I showed you, doesn’t it? You’ve been acting strange ever since you saw it, and you even snuck out of the academy to come here. You said it yourself. You’re not allowed to leave the academy without permission. You’d stayed put all this time, but as soon as you saw the ad... What’s going on?”

“...”

“Don’t make me angry, Victorique. You’re acting like your brother, Inspector Blois. The way he ignores you, your turning your back to me, it’s

exactly the same. Do you hate me like he hates you? I thought we were friends.”

“...”

“You said you were one of my few friends.”

It started drizzling outside. A mist had risen, covering the mountains.

Raindrops pattered on the frosted glass window, trickled down, then disappeared. The room felt a little colder.

Eventually, Victorique spoke. “I came here to clear someone’s name.”

“What?”

“Cordelia Gallo’s.”

Kazuya gazed at Victorique. She was biting her lip and staring at Kazuya with a frown.

He glanced down the corridor and closed the door so no one would hear them. He moved closer to Victorique. There was only one chair available, so he placed her mini suitcase on the floor beside her and sat down. He glanced up at her.

“Here.” Victorique began groping the breast of her nightgown. She flipped the huge frill. There was another frill, so she flipped that too. And then another one...

“...What are you doing?” Kazuya asked.

“Wait!”

“...”

She was still flipping through the frills.

“Hello?”

“Stay. Stay. Stay!”

“I’m not a dog, you know.”

Victorique lifted her head and eyed him curiously.

What finally emerged from the tangle of frills was a shiny, golden, round object. Kazuya stared at it for a while and realized that it was a gold coin. It had been turned into a pendant by drilling a small hole and threading a chain through it.

It looked like a toy made by a child, a mismatch against her luxurious outfit. It was nothing more than a gold coin with a chain.

“Cordelia gave it to me,” Victorique murmured.

“The same name that Inspector Blois mentioned when he saw you wearing that turban.”

“Cordelia Gallo is my mother.” Her voice was low.

Victorique flipped the pendant over and showed it to Kazuya. He reached for it like a knight accepting a gift from a woman of nobility.

On the other side of the gold coin was a small photograph.

A black-and-white photo of Victorique de Blois.

Her long hair was pulled back, like she did when she wore the turban, and she wore glamorous makeup. There was something really off about her seductive, red lips. She had an allure that wasn’t quite like Victorique—the allure of an adult.

“Is this... you?”

“No.” Victorique shook her head. “It’s Cordelia Gallo. My mother.”

Kazuya swallowed.

Rain began pouring down from the night sky, battering against the windows.

Victorique sat still on the chair, biting her lip.

“My mother was a dancer,” she began. “She used to appear on stage in her garments of woolen cloth and exotic makeup, and was very popular. But there were all sorts of incidents wherever she went. They say she was an enigmatic woman.”

Victorique’s voice was flat and calm, the same voice she used when she was on the top floor of the library, surrounded by books and tropical trees.

Rain continued to fall. The room was getting a little chilly. Kazuya was sitting on the mini suitcase, holding his knees and looking at Victorique.

“My mother got involved with Marquis de Blois at some point and gave birth to me, but then disappeared afterwards. I grew up isolated in a room on top of the marquis’ tower. I never knew my mother until she came up the tower one night and gave me this gold coin pendant. She was outside the window, but I recognized her immediately, because she looked just like me.”

“Outside the window? Of a tower?!”

“Cordelia is very acrobatic. And I mean, *very*.”

Kazuya fell silent.

“My mother is always watching over me.”

“I see...”

“She came from a village believed to be where the legends of the Gray Wolves originated. The people of that village had lived deep in the

mountains since the early sixteenth century, cut off from civilization. They were small, golden, very wise, but incredibly mysterious. It's difficult to find people from that village in the city, because they rarely leave the village. But Marquis de Blois wanted to introduce their special power into his bloodline. When he learned that a popular dancer was from the village, he made her his own. He wanted a boy, but a girl was born—me. Later on, I learned why my mother was banished from her village. She had worked as a maid there, but one night she committed a horrible crime. She was a criminal. Marquis de Blois regretted introducing our accursed blood into his bloodline. And because I was unusual, he felt scared. I was locked up in that tower and raised there. Books and time—plenty of it—were the only things he provided. My mother ran away and threw herself into the Great War that began soon after.”

Victorique paused. She took the pendant from Kazuya’s hand and wrapped it around her neck. The simple, gold coin pendant sank back into the frilly depths.

“I’ve always wanted to learn about the village where my mother was born.”

“Ahuh...”

“Everything goes back to that night. The night my mother committed the horrific crime. If not for that, she would not have been banished from the village. And I wouldn’t have been born.”

“I wouldn’t want that.”

Victorique’s green eyes widened in surprise. Then she pressed her hands to her lips and chuckled.

Kazuya blushed. “Wh-Why are you laughing?”

“You are one amusing man, Kujou.”

“Sue me.”

Victorique laughed. She then raised one hand and pointed to the door.

“You may leave. I’m going to bed.”

“O-Okay. It’s a lady’s room, I suppose.”

“I’m going to bed. Right now. Get out of here.”

“All right, all right! Sheesh... Good night, Victorique.”

Kazuya got up. When he made it to the door, he thought he heard Victorique say something and turned around.

It was just his imagination. Victorique's mouth was closed. But she was staring at him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I came to clear my mother's name."

"Yeah..."

Kazuya stared back at her, puzzled. Victorique's familiar face seemed distant, like that of a stranger. He felt uneasy.

"This is war," she said. "A war between the village of the Gray Wolves and her."

"I... see."

"And I am not going home until Cordelia Gallo wins."

When he stepped out onto the corridor, he heard the faint closing of a door.

He looked around and saw the door to Mildred's room quivering.

The next morning.

While Kazuya and Victorique were having breakfast of tea, bread, and cold ham in the inn's dining room, a group of young men came down the stairs.

A man of medium build with a beard and horn-rimmed glasses was talking rapidly without pausing. He seemed to be the talkative type.

Another man of about the same height, wearing an expensive-looking tailored jacket and a shiny gold watch, was chatting along with a wonderful smile. He had a high-pitched and resonant voice.

A large man with a stoop to his back was following behind them. When he noticed Kazuya and Victorique, he turned a little red and greeted them with a muffled voice. He seemed to be a very shy young man.

They settled down on some chairs, poured milk into their tea, and dug into the chunks of bread. They had huge appetites.

The talkative man with the beard and horn-rimmed glasses introduced himself to Kazuya and Victorique. According to him, they were students at an art university in Sauville, studying painting. They enjoyed traveling, and the three of them went around the countryside together, drawing sketches.

"This guy's family is loaded," he said, clapping the man with the gold watch and fine jacket on the shoulder. "See that car outside? Derek's

parents got it for him.”

Derek was about the same size as the bearded man Alan, but he had a smooth, feminine face. The last one, the tallest of the three, introduced himself as Raoul in a muted voice. He was extremely shy; just saying his own name made him blush.

Alan bragged about driving to the village of the Gray Wolves in a state-of-the-art German car. He sang praises of Derek’s parents for buying it. It was apparent that they were traveling on Derek’s wallet. Alan constantly put Derek on a pedestal, but he seemed to be the leader of the group. Raoul was silent the whole time, wearing a smile. He was a quiet young man who barely had any presence.

The innkeeper brought more tea and interrupted the conversation. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but you can’t get to the village of the Gray Wolves by car. The incline’s too steep.”

“Oh, come on!” Derek exclaimed.

Shocked, Alan made a big fuss about it. Raoul remained silent, looking uneasy.

“You should charter a carriage. A horse should manage.”

Derek nodded in resignation, but Alan didn’t stop grumbling. Raoul watched the bearded man awkwardly.

Mildred, the last one awake, plodded in with loud footsteps. She gave a big yawn. “Mornin’!” she greeted, then sank to a chair.

Kazuya yelped. The nun reeked of alcohol again. The three college students also noticed the smell and regarded Mildred curiously.

“These kids are going to the same place,” the innkeeper continued. “You should all go together. With five people, you’d pay less per person.”

“Make that six.” Mildred groggily raised her hand.

Everybody looked at her in surprise.

“I’m going too,” she said.

“...Why?” Kazuya asked.

She gave him a sharp glare. “Why not? I wanna go too. A carriage for six, then. Nice to meet you three.”

The three college students nodded, bewildered by Mildred’s sour breath.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

It sounded like a large knife chopping a chunk of meat on a butcher's table, dull and muffled. After a few claps of thunder, the overcast morning sky fell silent.

Large raindrops fell on the clothes of the people standing in front of the inn.

"There's your ride," the innkeeper said, pointing at a carriage lumbering down the street. "The driver's skills are top-notch."

It was an old four-wheeled carriage pulled by two horses. The driver was an old man with a long beard that covered half his face. Although he was old, he had strong, thick arms and broad shoulders noticeable even through his cloak that looked as ancient as the carriage itself.

As the carriage neared, the driver said, "Driving a car there is unthinkable. Even a horse-drawn carriage can't get up there unless the driver's good."

According to the old man, the people of the nameless village told him that if any guest wishing to get to the village after seeing their advertisement arrived, he should give them a ride. But the fare he asked for was much higher than the normal rate. When Kazuya tried to protest, Derek produced a thick wallet and immediately paid.

The driver goggled at the wallet. Regret clouded his face, as though he wished he had asked for more. Before Kazuya could say anything, Alan stopped him.

"It's okay," he said. "That's nothing to Derek."

"Can I chip in a little?"

"It's all good. Don't worry about it," he said proudly, as if he had paid for it.

Kazuya's eyes met Raoul's. The big, quiet man shrugged in agreement with his friend.

The six of them sat facing each other, three on each side, with their luggage in their arms. The carriage began moving slowly, trundling along the cobblestones. When they reached the peaty mountain road, the carriage started rattling. They had made it to the steep incline. The carriage rocked incessantly, as if a giant had grabbed it from above and shook it wildly.

"I feel sick," Mildred mumbled.

The three men, who had been having a nice chat, exchanged glances.

"Hungover, Sister?" Alan asked on behalf of the group.

Mildred shook her head, unwilling to even open her mouth.

Victorique reached for the window and opened it slightly. The falling rain made fine patterns outside.

Tangles of brown, thorny shrubs lined both sides of the road. The rain couldn't so much as jiggle them. Soon a fern and moss-covered bank came into view, with a sheer cliff down below. A little mishandling of the horses would send them plummeting headlong into the abyss. In the distance, a hill loomed shadowy in the mist.

The carriage clattered across a narrow, old stone bridge. Cold, muddy river winding through the valley rushed past underneath.

The trees were taller on the other side of the river. Blackish soil lay beneath olive-colored vegetation that wobbled in the light rain. They had been climbing for a while now. The trees grew taller and the forest darker. It was daytime, yet the forest was shrouded in a jet-black darkness. It felt like they had wandered into a nightmarish realm. Oak trees, bent and twisted perhaps by the wind and rain, intertwined, forming silhouettes shaped like hunched backs.

"By the way," Kazuya whispered to Victorique.

"What is it?"

"That nun stole the Dresden Plate at the bazaar, but she hasn't been caught. She also said she was from Horovitz, but the innkeeper said she didn't know her. Who on earth is she?"

"You don't have to worry about her."

Her words left him puzzled. She turned her face away, showing no interest in the subject. Kazuya fell silent.

The carriage went on for a while.

Suddenly, it became bright. They had made it out of the woods and onto a strange clearing.

Surrounded by mountains, it was round like a shallow-bottomed glass bowl. At the basin was a small town of stone houses enclosed by high ramparts.

No, not a town. A village.

The carriage stopped.

The two horses whickered and shook their heads. The driver tried to calm them down with his whip, but they kept on shaking their heads and stamping their hooves.

The six passengers alighted from the carriage.

Between the valley and the rugged path was a bluff that served as a massive wall, stretching all the way down. Sharp, jagged rocks glistened on the side of the sheer cliff. There was a white streak far below—a roaring muddy stream. Brown water topped with churning white foam crashed on the rocks.

Kazuya pulled his eyes away from the cliff, and looked at the gray village made of stone.

The clouds had lifted, and the morning sun shone down on the rooftops and moss-covered towers. They squinted against the brightness.

The three young men cheered with absolute glee.

“Wonderful!”

“Now this is what I call secluded! Incredible!”

The driver frowned.

Kazuya looked at Victorique. Standing beside him, she was staring at the gray stone village with a blank face.

On the other side of the cliff was a stone gatepost and a huge iron gate. They were massive, meant to keep outsiders away. High walls surrounding the village prevented intrusion from anywhere. It looked like a walled city from the middle ages.

The old wooden drawbridge had been raised. Made of flimsy wooden planks, it was turning white from much use. It was just wide enough for a carriage to pass through with a little extra room to spare. Several thick strings stretched across the bridge on both sides in place of railings.

On the iron gate was a crest of the ominous Gray Wolf.

“I’ll be taking my leave.” The driver turned his carriage around.
“According to the villagers, the Midsummer Festival will begin tomorrow morning and end at nightfall. I will pick you up tomorrow evening at this spot.”

The horses whinnied, stamping at the ground.

As Kazuya looked back at the carriage, he heard a loud rattling behind him. He turned his gaze to the direction of the sound.

The drawbridge was lowering.

And the massive iron gate slowly opened.

Monologue 2

We climbed a forbidding mountain.

The road was steep, and the carriage rocked wildly the whole time. Rain continued falling. Hardly anyone in the carriage spoke. There was only the sound of the wheels.

The little girl opened the window.

Her companion, an Asian boy named Kazuya Kujou, regarded her with concern.

It was adorable to watch the boy react to the girl's every move. They seemed to argue a lot. It was obvious to the adults that they got along well, but maybe these kids didn't see it that way.

The carriage shook.

Outside the window, dry branches of tangled trees seemed to go on forever.

But we have to push on.

I have to go to that village.

I cast an eye on the girl.

Her green eyes were as vibrant as the tropical seas, a sharp contrast to the dark, weather-beaten forest.

I glanced at the boy.

Jet-black eyes stared straight at the girl. He looked kind-hearted, but he had a stubborn jaw.

They don't know.

They don't know about my purpose.

They have no idea!

Chapter 3: Cordelia's Daughter

It felt as if they had entered a time portal and arrived at a distant medieval village.

The rain created a thick, milky mist that rolled in from the steep mountains surrounding the village to the small valley, blanketing it entirely like a veil.

As though entering a room through cream-colored curtains, the party plodded toward the village through the mist.

The bridge was very old; it squeaked with their every step. A muddy stream rushed far below, crashing onto rocks and churning foams. The wind howled. Their pace quickened.

As soon as they made it across, the drawbridge was raised once more. There was a stone arch inside the gate, with a turret above it. Several men were pulling the drawbridge. Their long, golden hair, tied back, bounced as they moved their arms. Before Kazuya could call to them, a gust blew, and a thicker mist obscured both the men and the horseshoe-shaped arch.

The mist shifted, then cleared up, giving them great visibility. The strong wind was deafening. Everyone except Victorique was covering their ears and watching their surroundings warily.

“Hey, look.” Alan pointed.

The mist was gradually clearing. Kazuya gasped.

A small village of square, stone houses came into view. Mossy, gray stones arranged in geometric shapes, as though applying some higher form of mathematics, coherent yet somehow disjointed.

Open wooden doors creaked in the wind. In the middle of the small square was a well.

There was no one around.

“Are these ruins?” Raoul mumbled, seemingly overwhelmed.

Derek nodded. “It’s a medieval village!” he exclaimed. “Look at that church...” He pointed to a tower in the distance.

“Those spires and those rose windows!”

“It’s like the medieval churches in old paintings.”

Alan removed his hat. The three young men stayed silent for a while, staring reverently at the place of worship.

Kazuya shot them a quizzical look.

“We’re art students,” Derek explained. “We know this stuff.”

Alan whistled with glee. Mildred was quiet and hanging her head, still feeling sick.

The wind blew again, clearing all the mist this time.

They froze.

Men stood in front of them, spears and swords in hand. They were watching the group with nary an expression on their faces.

Alan played with his beard. “Ghosts?” he murmured in a joking tone.

His reaction was understandable. The villagers were all wearing vintage outfits that matched the medieval look of the village.

The men wore woolen shirts with leather vests and pointy hats. The women’s skirts were loose and puffy in the back, and their hair was swept back, tucked in laced, round hats.

Their attire resembled costumes from Shakesperean plays.

And they all looked similar. Both men and women had long, golden hair, tied tight. They had petite statures, with small, refined faces, like dolls sculpted by a craftsman with painstaking precision.

The villagers observed them with dark, green eyes. Despite their clean-cut figures, their still faces and dry skin made them look like ghosts.

A stir ran through the villagers as they regarded Victorique.

“It’s Cordelia’s daughter.”

“Did you say Cordelia?”

“Look at her face. She’s the spitting image of her.”

“She’s bad luck...”

Their voices crackled like dead leaves falling. Clangs of steel sounded as the villagers raised their weapons all at once.

“Stop,” said a raspy voice.

The villagers lowered their weapons. They opened a path, and an old man stepped forward. A man in his sixties, wearing an old frock coat.

He had long, silvery hair—they might as well be white at this point—tied back in a tight knot. His sideburns and beard were long, and his eyes

were half-hidden by wrinkles and sagging flesh. He held a glossy ebony cane in his crinkly hand.

The man stood in front of Victorique with his hands clasped together, like a statue of a saint. His still, glassy eyes gleamed coldly.

He stared down at Victorique. “Cordelia’s daughter, huh? What’s your name?” he asked.

“Victorique de Blois,” she answered in a low, husky voice.

The man swallowed a little. “De Blois? So the blood of the kingdom’s nobility runs in your veins...”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“No. Your mother... Where is she?”

“She disappeared.”

“I see. There is no rest for the wicked.”

Victorique bit her lip. “Cordelia is innocent.” Her eyes burned.

“Talking back to your elders is foolish. Since you did not grow up in this village, you seem to lack the humility expected of a child. Even Cordelia did not disobey me and left in peace. But I digress.” The man cast a sweeping glance at the villagers. “This girl is a descendant who came after reading our message. She’s the daughter of Cordelia. But a child does not bear their parents’ sins. She will not be turned away. Let us celebrate Midsummer together.”

The villagers were silent. Dark eyes flickered around, but no one said a word.

“You will do as I say,” the old man continued. “Fret not. Nothing bad will happen. Even if her mother Cordelia...”

The wind blew, and the man’s silver beard swayed.

“...is a murderer.”

The old man introduced himself as Sergius, the village chief. He said that the village had been here for four hundred years. They severed contact with the outside world and lived as self-sufficiently as possible.

He led them through the village. “During the Midsummer Festival,” he began, “we welcome the spirits of our ancestors who return home in the summer, and pray for a good harvest. It begins tomorrow morning at dawn and ends at nightfall. I would like all of you to stay here until then.”

“Tomorrow evening,” Victorique mumbled.

“Yes. A little over a day to go. At dawn tomorrow, we will bring out the floats in the square and play instruments to announce to the forest that the festival is about to begin. We then take a break until noon, when the festival starts. The girls throw hazelnuts to signal the beginning of the festival. The young men then dress up in costumes and perform a skit in the square. The skit is about a battle between the Summer Army and the Winter Army, ending with the Summer Army’s victory and the Winter Man’s, the leader of the Winter Army, defeat. After celebrating Summer’s victory, we prepare to welcome our ancestors. It is said that they will come to the square through the cathedral, so it has to be empty of people during that time. At night, selected villagers put on masks, play the role of our ancestors, and dance. Then the festival ends, and we will be guaranteed a year of peace and bountiful harvest!” He went on to explain other things.

Kazuya had been feeling restless after hearing the word murderer. Meanwhile, the three young men were ecstatic.

“Look at this well!”

“Stone houses, fireplaces, and chimneys. Ugh. Talk about ancient.”

Alan showed off his state-of-the-art wristwatch to the blonde young man carrying a hunting rifle beside Sergius. He appeared to be the village chief’s assistant. He was taller than most villagers and had remarkably handsome features. He glanced at the watch, then stared at it intently.

“You’ve never seen one of these before?” Alan asked.

“I don’t leave the village.”

“Really? Then what do you do all day?”

Alan continued chatting with the young man. After showing his watch, he bragged about his horn-rimmed glasses, then pulled on Derek’s clothes next.

Sergius frowned, and his long eyebrows twitched.

The village chief led them toward the square in the middle of the village. There were ramparts only at the entrance, near the bluff. On the other side of the village, along the small, dark forest, stood precipitous cliffs in place of walls.

It was a small, round village. Kazuya was surprised to find that life in this place had remained exactly the same for hundreds of years.

Sergius glanced at the forest. Tree branches swayed in the wind.

The old man snatched the hunting rifle from his young assistant, lifted it, and pointed the muzzle toward the woods.

Alan and Derek, chatting merrily, did not notice.

The young assistant gulped.

A gunshot rang out.

Alan and his friends jumped and shared looks.

“Wh-What was that for?”

“Wolves,” Sergius said flatly. “There are wild wolves living in the mountains around here. They’re big and quite tough. If we see one, we scare it away like this.”

The young men exchanged glances.

“Inconspicuous cliffs and wild wolves prevent anyone from entering from the forest,” the assistant added. “The only way to safely enter the village is to cross the drawbridge.” He pursed his lips in fear and never spoke another word.

“But Gramps,” Alan said, stroking his beard. “The people in Horovitz call you guys Gray Wolves. They say you’re an enigma. Right?” He glanced at Raoul.

His silent friend nodded, his large body shrinking as he glanced at the hunting rifle. The young assistant gulped—how could the man call the village chief gramps? His eyes darted between Alan and Sergius, wondering if he should get angry for the disrespect.

Sergius gave a dry chuckle. “Nonsense! We are normal humans. When you live an outdated lifestyle deep in the mountains, people tend to assume a lot of things.”

“I see.” Alan nodded.

Derek laughed, and Raoul grinned.

“We’re of a different race is all,” the old man added. “Perhaps the people down there can feel it in their skin—they sense that we are different. We have not done anything to them.” He continued walking.

Strolling along the cobblestone street, the group passed through the square and by the church, studying the ancient structure on the way. Behind the cathedral was a cemetery veiled thinly by the mist. Kazuya found it eerie, so he looked away. A dark forest, its trees blanketed by a thick fog, loomed beyond the cemetery.

Suddenly the path became wider. Before they could enter the woods, Sergius stopped.

The cobblestone path continued upward at a gentle slope, shrouded by layers of fog like thin organdie curtains. The mist shifted in the wind, and rose. Up ahead, on a blackened hill, was something large, curled up.

Something gray, with an unimaginably huge body. Mildred let out a shriek.

A large, gray creature.

It lay on the dark hill, now, but it looked like it would rise at any moment, turn its head, and pounce at them.

A gigantic, gray wolf.

The eerie rumors from Horovitz flashed through Kazuya's mind. The innkeeper, his face dark with fear.

Gray wolves live there.

You must not anger them.

You must not incur even their slightest wrath.

Terrifying werewolves.

A gust of wind blew.

Huh? Kazuya rubbed his eyes.

He noticed that the huge figure was made of stone. Nothing but a cold, inanimate object. An illusion, he realized.

It was a large, darkish gray manor, made of flat stones.

The tall tower on the left resembled an animal's head. The pillars by the entrance bore elaborate rosette carvings, and the roof was beautifully decorated. But the stone walls, which might have looked dazzling on a fine day, was an ominous gray.

It was a mysterious manor, lavish but lacking in color, as if drawn with a brush using only black ink.

Red unfamiliar flowers bobbing in the breeze were the only thing that provided color in the otherwise bleak surroundings. The narrow flowerbeds were blood vessels twisting around the building, forming curious patterns.

"This is my home," Sergius said in his raspy voice.

The group exchanged glances.

"You will stay here during the festivities."

The manor was huge and dark and luxurious, with polished mahogany furniture and velvet curtains in every room, vastly different from the crude stone-built village.

Past the wide foyer was a red-carpeted grand staircase, and beyond that was a hall with a glittering chandelier. Up the staircase, a long corridor with heavy curtains ran the length of the manor. The wall lamps near the ceiling shimmered orange.

Portraits of their ancestors hung in the dim corridor, handsome and dignified faces, their long golden hair tied back. The face on the portrait closest to them was the youngest, seemingly in their forties.

While studying the portraits, an innocent, childlike voice came from somewhere.

“That’s Elder Theodore. The murdered village chief.”

Victorique’s shoulders jerked. They all turned to the direction of the voice.

A woman was standing there with a lamp in her hand. She was about twenty-five or twenty-six years old. Her hair was a deep golden, tied in complex braids, each length curled up. Her handsome face, however, was devoid of emotion, giving the impression of a broken doll. Her head, cocked to the side, looked like it would fall to the floor at any moment.

Her glassy green eyes, reminiscent of jade, gleamed in the dark.

Her attire, old-fashioned like the village chief, marked her as a maid. Her skirt was long and puffy at the back. Her waist was cinched with a corset, and a white collar covered her neck so that no skin was visible.

Sergius turned around. “Her name is Harminia. She’s a maid in this manor.”

Harminia gave a small curtsy. Her cold eyes regarded Victorique.

“You’re the spitting image of Cordelia.”

Kazuya swallowed.

Her voice sounded different this time, low and deep, like a man’s.

“I was only a child, but I remember well when Cordelia was banished,” she continued. Her voice changed from high to low, from male to female, adult to child. “Yes, it was ten years ago. In this manor...”

“Harminia.”

“She scattered gold coins in Elder Theodore’s study, and—”

“Harminia.”

“With a dagger...”

“Harminia!”

She closed her mouth and lifted her left hand. With everyone watching her, she brought her forefinger to her face, pulled her lower eyelid and rubbed her eye, over and over.

The group gulped. She was rubbing her eye with considerable force. Capillaries ran like fine, red cracks on the whites of her left eye.

Rub, rub.

The white of her eye was exposed.

Rub, rub.

Suddenly Harminia pulled her hand away.

The light from the lamp seemed to dim a little.

They were gathered around the dining room table for a light lunch prepared by Harminia.

“The incident happened in the study,” Sergius began. “It’s an old room at the back on the first floor. No one uses it anymore, though.”

A marble mantelpiece sat above the fireplace. Glass lamps hung on black-panelled walls adorned with paintings. The room was opulent, yet somehow stifling. Kazuya realized that it was probably due to the low ceiling, both in the room and in the corridor. He felt like he could get crushed at any moment. He thought that perhaps it was because the people of the villager were shorter.

Sandwiches, tea, and baked goods were all served in old, but well-polished silverware sets.

“That day, Elder Theodore was holed up in his study since evening,” Sergius continued. “When the clock struck twelve midnight, Cordelia—she was fifteen that time—would go to change the water in the jug.”

Fifteen years old, Kazuya mused. The same age as me and Victorique right now.

“Back then I served as Elder Theodore’s assistant, so I was in the manor the night of the incident. As I passed through the hallway with the other men, I saw Cordelia just as she was about to enter the study. She was carrying a crude iron candlestick like she always did. She knocked, then reached for the doorknob. The door didn’t open. It was locked. The door

was usually kept unlocked, but sometimes Elder Theodore would lock it when he didn't want to be disturbed. We passed by Cordelia right when she used her key to open the door. I believe it was exactly twelve o'clock. I looked at my pocket watch, you see. Cordelia was always right on time. But for some reason, the men's testimonies about the time were mixed, and now I'm not even certain what time it was. In any case..."

The three men munched on their food, constantly grumbling about the old ingredients. Whenever Alan said something, Derek would reply in his high-pitched voice. Raoul remained silent, but kept studying and tapping the silverware curiously. All three didn't seem interested in Sergius' story, so they barely listened.

Mildred was quiet, still not feeling well from her hungover. She had barely touched her food.

Victorique listened to Sergius' story.

"Cordelia came running out of the study, screaming. We rushed to her and held her down as she flailed in terror. When I entered the study, it was dark. I held out my candle and found Elder Theodore lying on his face. He was already dead, stabbed in his upper back with a dagger. The bloodstained tip of the blade was protruding from his chest. And for some odd reason..." Sergius paused, and in a very curious voice, added, "...there were a lot of gold coins scattered all over the floor."

"Gold coins?"

"Yes. About twenty pieces, I believe. But since we don't use gold coins in this village, Elder Theodore had stashed them away. The gold coins were soaked in his blood and stained red."

"..."

"After that, Cordelia was confined to bed with a high fever. Apparently, she kept mumbling "so many round, pretty things" over and over. She probably meant the coins. We discussed the matter over while she was bedridden. Ten days passed. When her fever broke and she was able to get up, I, as the next village chief, banished her from the village."

"You banished her?" Kazuya said.

"I did. I sent her out of the village with a suitcase and one gold coin, then raised the drawbridge. I didn't even know if she made it down the mountain safely. Wild wolves, steep cliffs, mountain torrents. I didn't think that a girl, who had never left the village, would make it safely to the town

at the foot of the mountain. I still remember her face, clutching a single gold coin, her green eyes filled with tears, looking up at the drawbridge as it rose. Cordelia was an orphan. No one taught her how to climb down the mountain, no one gave her warm clothes or food or anything. Her only guardian was me, the village chief's assistant. She had no relatives, so I had her work as a maid in the manor. It was I who handed down her punishment. Cordelia must have spent several days climbing down the mountains to the city. It had not even been long since she recovered. But she managed to survive. And now her daughter has come."

"How... How could you banish her?" Kazuya said.

"We could think of no other culprit than her," he went on. "The study was locked from the inside. She said so herself. There were only two keys. One of them was in Elder Theodore's person, and the other with Cordelia. Moreover, she said that when she entered the study, she used the candlestick in her hand to look around. There was no one there but Elder Theodore and her. She claimed that he was already dead at that time, but it didn't make sense. Something must have happened after she entered the study that ended up with her killing Elder Theodore. She then developed a fever, most likely out of remorse."

"But that's not enough proof that she's the culprit."

"I did not err in my judgment," the old man breathed. "With the death of Elder Theodore, I became the next village chief. My ruling is absolute."

"But..."

"Wrongdoers must be dealt with. Otherwise, misfortune will befall the village. It is my duty to protect this place."

"..."

"Cordelia committed an evil deed," he reemphasized. "That is the only explanation."

"I'd like to see the study," Victorique said.

Sergius shook his head. "I can't allow that."

"Why not?"

"I don't want guests wandering around."

They were provided guest rooms located on the manor's third floor. Large canopied beds sat in the middle of the spacious rooms. Huge mirrors

that showed the chest up were built into the walls, and glossy velvet curtains hung inside.

Victorique, Kazuya, Mildred, Alan, Derek, and Raoul were assigned rooms in that order. Kazuya took Victorique's luggage and carried it to her room. She didn't so much as glance at him. Her small hand was on her chin in thought.

Victorique put her pipe in her mouth, and lit it. She then stretched, reached for a string at the edge of the window, and pulled hard.

The curtains slowly rolled open, revealing a view of stone balconies and dense oak trees.

Squinting, she stared at the scenery.

"Is something wrong?" Kazuya asked, moving beside her.

The dreary cemetery behind the old cathedral was visible through the trees.

Victorique remained silent for a while. Then abruptly she left the room.

Kazuya quickly followed. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going for a walk."

"A walk?"

Victorique did not reply. She placed one hand on the shiny bronze railing and descended the grand marble staircase.

Harminia, who was cleaning with a brass bucket and a white cloth in her hands, craned her head like a snake and followed the little girl's figure with her gaze.

Once she made it past the front porch, Victorique slowed down, allowing Kazuya to catch up. He fell in beside her.

They passed a few villagers on the cobblestone path. None spared them any glance. Victorique herself walked along without looking at them.

"Where are you going?" a voice called.

Kazuya spun. He didn't even notice the young man behind him, almost as if he blended in with the fog.

His old-fashioned attire, reminiscent of costumes in Shakespearean plays, instantly identified him as one of the villagers. He had long, golden hair tied at the back, and clear, white skin as smooth as a girl's. His eyes were the same deep green as Victorique's, but devoid of emotion. His face was as cold as a Noh mask.

Kazuya remembered him—Sergius' assistant, who was with the village chief the whole time. He had shown genuine surprise at the things that Alan and his friends showed him.

"I can be your guide," he said. "Oh, my name is Ambrose. Nice to meet you."

Oh? Kazuya's impression of Ambrose suddenly changed. Once he started smiling, he started to look like a spirited and cheerful young man. His cheeks were red and full of life. His lady-like, finely chiseled features began showing a charming, joyful expression.

"It's been a long time since we've had guests from outside, so, uhm, I'm glad. I'll try not to get too carried away."

"Are you welcoming us?" Kazuya asked, surprised.

Ambrose fell silent for a bit, unsure what to say. "The villagers don't like change. They don't like interacting with people from other cultures. Elder Sergius says the people outside live horrible lifestyles."

"Do you agree with him?"

"I..." He went silent once more.

He studied Kazuya's face and body. Kazuya felt uneasy. Next Ambrose reached out to touch him. His lady-like features made Kazuya reluctant, but he eventually gave in. Ambrose rubbed Kazuya's cheeks curiously, pulled his hair, and so on. Kazuya tried to bear it at first, but he eventually snapped.

"What's your problem?!"

"I was just wondering why your skin and hair color are different. I knew that people in the outside world are not all blonde..."

It was apparently the first time he had ever seen an Asian. He looked into Kazuya's eyes, and patted his face.

"Victorique, help!"

The girl snorted and looked up at Ambrose. "Can you show me somewhere?"

"Just tell me where you want to go," he said with a smile. "In return, can I touch this person a little longer?"

"Feel free."

"Vi—!"

Victorique turned the other way. "Take me to Cordelia's house," she said.

Ambrose's fingers suddenly turned cold. He pulled his hand away from Kazuya's face and stared at Victorique. Color had left his face, and only glassy eyes and a blank expression—the same as the rest of the villagers—remained.

Cordelia's house was located in a corner where square stone houses lined the street.

It stood like a solitary island, far away from other houses, as though being near it was taboo. Withered vines and the elements had formed curious patterns on the walls. The structure was terribly dilapidated.

After showing them the place, Ambrose quickly left and disappeared into the mist.

Kazuya was on edge, but Victorique was unconcerned. She put her hand on the doorknob. It was unlocked. The dirt that had accumulated over time blackened Victorique's small, chubby palm. Kazuya took out a handkerchief and wiped her hands. She brushed him off, then entered the small house.

It was incredibly old.

Was every house in the village like this? Surrounded by cold, stone walls, there were only a small kitchen and a bedroom. A meager enclosure too shabby to be called a fireplace was gathering dust by the wall. A worn desk and chair. A small wooden bed with frayed cotton sheets. Each of the furniture was old and shoddy. It was like a reflection of the villagers' glassy eyes and lifeless faces.

Kazuya was shocked at how different the house was to the village chief's manor.

It's like a whole different place!

When his eyes regained focus, he noticed girly decorations here and there. An empty bottle of jam with the remnants of a wild flower sat by the window. The curtains, though tattered, were hand-stitched lace with a lovely pattern.

Kazuya could tell that a girl indeed lived here. He felt the strong presence of the long-gone girl washing over him.

Victorique's treasured photo...

A mysterious, beautiful woman with a face similar to hers, but wearing exotic, glamorous makeup, gazing at him.

Cordelia Gallo had lived here.

Victorique looked around the room silently. Her pretty red lips were tightly pursed as she moved from one spot to another, studying things.

“What are you doing?” Kazuya asked.

“I don’t know. I’m looking for something.” She turned around. Her tightly-knit brows and desperate look made him serious as well. “We can only stay in this village until tomorrow night. After the Midsummer Festival, we will be shown the door. I have to find something before then!”

“R-Right...”

Victorique searched around the room, moving faster as time went on. Dust rose, and Kazuya coughed. A while later, Victorique stopped and gave up.

“There’s nothing,” she said.

“Looks like it...”

“I had a feeling that my mother left something in this village. A message. But I can’t find it.”

Victorique bit her lip hard. She crouched down and knocked on the floor with her small clenched fists. More dust rose, and Kazuya coughed again.

“What are you doing?”

“Knocking on the floor.”

“I can see that.”

“If there’s a spot where it sounds different, it means there’s a hole underneath.”

“I’ll do it, then. Just stand aside.”

Kazuya went down on his knees and began knocking on the floor, starting from the corner. When he was done with the kitchen, he moved to the bedroom. Finally, he found a spot that echoed loudly. Victorique came a little closer.

They both raised the floorboard, sending a lot of dust in the air.

Underneath was a small hollow, a shallow square hole that could fit a couple of books. There seemed to be nothing in there at first glance, but a closer inspection revealed a photograph hidden under the dust.

They exchanged looks.

Victorique grabbed the old photo and brushed the dust off with her tiny, pale forefinger.

It was a photograph of a noblewoman.

Her hair was tied up, adorned with shining pearl ornaments, and she was wearing a dress with a plunging neckline. She was holding something in her arms—a baby, wrapped in a soft cloth fringed with silk and lace.

A photo of a mother and child.

The woman was no doubt Cordelia Gallo, the same woman in the photo inside Victorique's gold coin pendant.

A photo of a grown-up Cordelia and her baby.

"Why is this here?" Victorique murmured. "Kujou, this is strange. Cordelia Gallo was banished from the village when she was fifteen years old. Twenty years had passed, and she had not returned since. But she's already an adult in this photo, and if the baby is me, then this was probably taken a little over ten years ago." She frowned. "What do these fragments mean? Where does this chaos lead?"

"What now?"

"Someone came here. Years after Cordelia was banished. That someone took what was left in the hole. And as a secret message, he left a picture of an adult Cordelia. Who was it? What was their relationship with Cordelia? What did they take?" Victorique shook her head. "So many questions. But I have found a fragment."

They exited Cordelia's house and quietly closed the door.

Victorique was lost in thought, and gradually stopped explaining things to Kazuya. She just stood at the door, pensive.

Kazuya brushed the dust off from Victorique's hair and clothes and wiped the dirt from her cheeks and palms with a handkerchief. Victorique hastened her pace, giving no time for him to clean himself up.

"We're both covered in dust," Kazuya grumbled as he caught up with her. "I didn't even bring a change of clothes, because you wouldn't tell me where we were going. Hey, are you listening?"

Victorique only snorted in response. With quicker steps, she headed straight for the cemetery behind the cathedral.

"Where are you going?"

"Taking a look at the victim's grave."

Kazuya frowned, but followed hesitantly.

As soon as they entered the hazy cemetery, it suddenly felt colder. A number of old gravestones, covered in dark green vines, stood in a row. The fog made for poor visibility. Kazuya followed Victorique as she walked ahead of him, keeping his eyes on the fringe peeking out from the bottom of her bulging skirt and the long velvet ribbon hanging from her hat.

Argh, darn it. I can't leave her alone somewhere spooky. What if she falls into a hole or something? I gotta man up.

Eventually, Victorique stopped. Gravel crunched under her laced, leather shoes.

Kazuya studied the mossy stone cross buried in the soft soil in front of him. Victorique was staring at it with pursed lips.

He read the name carved on the headstone. "The... o... dore..."

It was the name of the village chief who was killed twenty years ago. The epitaph, inscribed in dated phrases, described him as a bright man from his youth and a respectable village chief. It also mentioned his untimely death. Kazuya struggled with the grammar before he could read the whole text.

Victorique gasped.

"What's wrong?" Kazuya asked.

"Look here." Victorique's finger quivered.

At the bottom of the cross, Kazuya saw something just barely hidden by the soil. It looked like small handwritten letters, carved using a sharp stone or something. Only one letter peeked out. Victorique extended her small hand to dig into the earth. She looked like a small critter digging a hole to bury nuts. Kazuya quickly stopped her, and proceeded to dig himself, smearing the inside of his nails black.

Characters began to appear. But the soil made it difficult to see clearly.

Kazuya wiped the cross with a handkerchief. As the cloth turned blacker, the letters became clearer. From the past to the present, as though revived by some mystical force.

Tears welled up in Victorique's eyes as she stared at the words.

I am innocent C

The writing was shaky.

Victorique regarded the letters for a while. Then she rose to her feet.

She stamped her small foot on the ground, as if venting her anger. Her laced, leather-clad foot dug into the gravel. Birds took off beyond the mist,

startled either by the sound or her rage. There was an incessant flapping of wings that eventually faded away.

A lone white feather slowly drifted from above the thick, milky mist. It fell onto the gravel and quivered.

The wind blew, and the fog shifted.

There was a faint sound of laughter coming from somewhere. Strange voices, high-pitched and chilling, like murmurs from the afterlife.

Kazuya moved closer to Victorique.

She was standing still as though she had not heard anything. "This was written by Cordelia," she mumbled.

"Victorique. Let's head back."

"My mother was banished for a crime she did not commit."

"Victorique..."

"Then who's the real culprit?"

Victorique lifted her head and stared at Kazuya's face. Her emerald eyes looked glassy as it reflected the shifting fog.

"I think the culprit is still in this village."

A faint laugh sounded again.

Victorique's eyes reflected the view behind Kazuya. A wind gusted, clearing the thick, milky mist. He thought he saw a large blackish shape behind him. He swallowed and whirled around, shielding Victorique.

This time he heard it clearly.

It was growl roar of a beast.

Grrr...

A faint, guttural voice.

The growl grew louder.

Kazuya's nose caught a familiar scent. When he realized what it was, his heart tightened.

The zoo. The same smell that filled the zoo that he had visited with his family once. The smell of beasts.

"Victorique, there's something out there!"

Kazuya squeezed Victorique's hand. The fog was getting thicker and thicker, weighing down on them like heavy fabric. As if to flip the cloth over, Kazuya held his hand above him, and broke into a run.

"Kujou?"

"There's something there! Run!"

Victorique turned around. Her hat almost flew away, and she reached for it. Kazuya grabbed it first and started running again.

He could feel the beast's breathing, anguished snarls, and smelly breath hounding them. When they reached the cobblestone path, he could hear not only their own footsteps, but also the clattering of what sounded like hooves. Four legs drummed on the cobblestones.

Kazuya and Victorique made it to the manor. A strong wind blew Victorique's long, golden hair, which resembled a velvet sash.

The fog gradually lifted. They opened the front door.

Kazuya pushed Victorique inside, then rushed after her, closing the door behind him.

Ceaseless growls came from outside. Snarls and ragged breathing. A loud noise like someone trying to pry the door open.

Kazuya stayed still as he held Victorique. She was breathing softly, her eyes wide, her body curled up.

Several minutes passed.

The sound, the presence, disappeared.

Shielding Victorique, Kazuya gently opened the door.

The fog had completely lifted, and there was nothing there. The rain, too, had completely stopped; a warm sun shone above.

"Thank goodness it was nothing," Kazuya said, a smile appearing on his face. As his gaze lowered, he swallowed.

The bottom of the front door bore claw marks.

As they climbed the stairs and made their way to their respective rooms, Kazuya heard loud voices coming from the end of the hallway.

He came to the door and knocked.

I believe this is Alan's room.

There was an answer, so he peered in and found Alan, Derek, Raoul, and a woman he didn't recognize inside.

The four of them were dealing cards, playing poker. Derek seemed to be an easy target for the woman and kept losing to her. Alan and Raoul were watching their friend with a grin as he whined about his losses. When Alan gave him a tip for fun, Raoul smirked, curling up his big body. They didn't care what happened to Derek's wallet, it seemed.

"Where have you been?" the stranger asked.

Kazuya stared at her, bewildered. She was a young woman with fiery red hair kept in dolly curls, big and puffy like cotton candy. Her eyes, however, were a familiar, lonely bluish-gray.

Through the square-cut bosom of her simple white summer dress peeked a magnificent chest, so large and round that it could have been mistaken for a pair of buttocks. The same reddish freckles on her cheeks dotted her cleavage, forming a lovely floral pattern.

When the woman saw Kazuya's frown, she said, "Come on, now. It's me!" She grabbed a nearby sheet and wrapped it around her head.

"Wait, Mildred?!"

The face and bluish-gray eyes definitely belonged to the nun. But her vibe had completely changed, as if she were a different person. Changing from a stuffy habit to regular clothes highlighted her jovial and cheerful nature. Mildred threw her head back and guffawed.

Flailing her arms, she said, "I can't believe you couldn't recognize me just because my hairstyle changed. What a silly boy."

The three young men laughed. Kazuya blushed.

Kazuya and Victorique also settled into the room. The six guests shared what they had been up to since their arrival. The young men had stayed in their rooms playing poker all night because of the bad weather and the creepy villagers. Mildred joined them halfway, and they were just getting into the swing of things.

"We were chased by a wolf," Kazuya said.

When he told them about their escape from the cemetery, Mildred's face contorted in fear, but the three young men were rejoicing.

"Fascinating!" Alan exclaimed, tugging at his beard.

Derek started laughing, while Raoul grinned silently.

"It's *not* fascinating," Kazuya snapped.

"The village chief was fussing about wolves."

"He did..."

"Let's be careful too, yeah?" Alan said.

Derek laughed again. Only Raoul curled up in fear. The old chair he was sitting in creaked.

Alan looked at Mildred. “By the way, Sister. What happened to the phone?”

Mildred shook her head.

“What’s this about a phone?” Kazuya asked.

“She told the village chief she wanted to make a phone call. He said there was electricity, so she thought maybe there was a phone.”

“Speaking of which, you also used the phone at the inn last night,” Kazuya said.

Mildred cleared her throat, ending the conversation.

Victorique, who had been silent, suddenly asked, “So there really *is* electricity here.”

“That’s right!” Kazuya said, finally realizing it. “They live deep in the mountains with no interaction with the outside world, so why do they have electricity?”

Alan grinned. “Yes. Surprisingly, the lamps in this manor are not powered by oil or gas. They run on electricity. True, we’re deep in the mountains, but the lack of human settlement makes construction of facilities easier. It would cost a lot, though! I hear the tourist destinations in the Swiss mountains are getting more advanced.”

“But this place is—”

“No. It’s not a tourist destination.” Alan nodded, then looked at Victorique. “You sounded like you knew.”

“To a certain extent, yes.” Victorique gave a nod.

All of them stared at her. The room suddenly turned quiet. Only Victorique remained calm and collected.

Her small lips parted. “Sergius said that they lived almost self-sufficiently. Do you really think that’s possible? What about iron? Can they make tea and wine on their own? Impossible. Sergius also mentioned that Theodore stashed away gold coins, and that he himself had given Cordelia one when he banished her. That means they have the same currency as the outside world, and they’re aware of its value.”

“Ah...”

Kazuya and Alan nodded at the same time.

“They probably have some contact with the outside world,” Victorique continued. “Even if most of the villagers never step out of this place, the village chief at least has some knowledge and information. That’s how they

were able to put up the ad in the newspaper. Besides, the driver of the carriage we rode in was afraid of the village, but he seemed to be familiar with the path up the mountain. I'm sure he's been delivering their supplies all this time—their tea, wine, newspapers, magazines.” Abruptly, she stopped.

Silence descended in the room.

Mildred, who had been busy flipping through cards and pondering, raised her head. “I thought it was strange, so I asked that weird maid. She said they have a sponsor of some sorts.”

“A sponsor?” Kazuya said.

“Yup. What was their name again? Right, a guy named Brian. Brian Roscoe. Apparently, he’s a descendant of a villager who left the village. They don’t know much about him except that he’s a rich young man. He found out about the village about ten years ago and gave them funds. Quite the madman, huh? Imagine going through all the trouble of installing electricity for a village located deep in the mountains.”

“...I see.” Victorique nodded. When she noticed Kazuya’s inquisitive look, she added, “I’ve always wondered why they put up an ad calling for their descendants. Perhaps they wanted to find other sponsors like Brian Roscoe.”

“Makes sense...”

“That is why when I introduced myself, Sergius was fixated on my noble blood. He then silenced the villagers who objected because I was Cordelia’s daughter, and invited us to the manor.”

“Wait, you’re nobility? Are you rich?” Mildred asked with a bright face.

Victorique’s eyes narrowed significantly. “I don’t have anything to my name.”

“Oh.” Mildred tossed her losing cards onto the table.

Victorique looked at Kazuya like she wanted to say something, so he brought his face closer to hers.

“Ten years ago, a descendant, Brian Roscoe, came to the village,” she whispered so only he could hear. “He came for some purpose.”

“To install electricity, right?”

“Someone entered Cordelia’s house, took something, and left a picture of an adult Cordelia. It was someone who visited the village within the last twenty years. In which case, it could only be the man named Brian Roscoe.”

But who is he? Where did he meet Cordelia, and why? What's his purpose? What did he take from under that floorboard?"

"Hmm..."

"Ten years ago was when the Great War started. It was a bit too hectic a time to install electricity deep in the mountains."

Victorique closed her mouth tight. She seemed reluctant to say any more. Kazuya couldn't tell what went on behind her dark eyes.

Playtime was coming to an end.

Raoul stood up and eyed everyone. "W-Want to listen to some radio?"

"...Radio?" Kazuya said.

"I brought one," Derek said proudly. "I heard there was electricity, so I hooked it up. Since we're deep in the mountains, it might not pick things up clearly, though."

"Did you have a radio in your luggage?" Kazuya asked.

Derek approached the square radio on top of a chest. There was an old statue of Mary and a decorative compass beside it. Derek fiddled with the radio intently.

As he turned the dial, the radio emitted a grating noise. The sound of a trumpet mingled with it. Carefully, Derek turned the knob in search of the sound. Eventually, the noise vanished.

Cheerful music began to play. It was choppy, but still discernible. Derek turned up the volume. A high trumpet sounded. He looked up with a smile.

"How's that?" Derek said.

Kazuya also smiled. The lively music dispelled the village's eerie atmosphere, lifting his mood. Alan whistled. The shy Raoul started shaking his shoulders.

Mildred stood up and whistled, imitating Alan.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," she said. "This should drive away the gloom. Come on, dance!"

"Are you really a nun?" Derek muttered.

Mildred pulled Raoul's arm, and they began dancing together. The music gradually became louder.

Mildred footsteps were loud as she danced. She seemed jovial. When she twirled around, her red hair billowed.

Kazuya was staring at them blankly. He started feeling uncomfortable.



It felt like the walls were receding, growing larger, and the entire room was shaking.

There was a jarring sound.

The higher volume meant the noise was loud as well. Puzzled, Derek fiddled with the radio. It started producing a rattling sound, and stopped.

“Huh?”

The room fell silent, and everyone looked at each other.

Derek messed around with the radio. But it wouldn’t play any more.

“Is it broken?” Alan asked.

Derek’s shoulders quivered. “No way. It’s the latest type.” Frustrated, he flipped the radio over and twiddled it.

The sun was setting outside, and the room was suddenly dim.

Everyone glanced at each other in silence. Mildred plopped down on a seat.

Victorique yawned and stretched. She then stood up and walked out of the room.

Kazuya quickly rose to his feet. “Are you going back to your room?”

“Yes. I have to unpack my luggage.”

“Okay. I’m heading back to my room as well.”

“No. You will be in my room unpacking my stuff.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes, really.”

They exited the room, closing the door behind them.

Mildred stared at the door, fear clouding her bluish-gray eyes.

Back in Victorique’s room, the two busied themselves.

Kazuya was on the floor, taking Victorique’s belongings out of her mini-suitcase and organizing them. He tucked away her clothes in a drawer of plain wood, and set the small, assorted items on the mantelpiece. As he passed by the mirror on the wall, Kazuya met Victorique’s eyes through the reflection.

Victorique was sitting in a large rocking chair by the window, smoking her pipe. Made for adults, the chair was, of course, too big for her, and most of her body had sunk into the gobelin cushion. She had been staring out the open window. Outside, the mist hid and revealed the stone balcony and oak tree.

Now her gaze was back in the room, staring at Kazuya through the mirror.

“...What?” Kazuya said.

“You’re such a neat freak.”

“Now that’s just rude. This is normal.”

“...”

Victorique picked up the rocking chair cushion and threw it on the floor. Kazuya immediately rushed over, picked up the cushion, dusted it off, and brought it to Victorique.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Why’d you do that?”

“To prove that you’re a neat freak. I’m satisfied with the results. If you’re done tidying up, go back to your room.”

“Okay... Wait a minute. Why was I organizing your stuff?”

“I’d be happy to unravel that mystery to you, but it’s too much trouble. Off you go.”

Kazuya clicked his tongue, hanging his head.

Victorique pulled her eyes away from Kazuya, and, pipe in hand, watched the thick mist out the window with melancholic eyes. She turned her head to Kazuya. Before he could exit the room, she called, “Kujou.”

“What?”

“I don’t think any of the villagers noticed Cordelia’s message inscribed on Theodore’s tombstone.”

“Probably not. Otherwise, they would’ve erased it.”

“After twenty years, I’m the one who found it.”

“Yeah...”

Victorique bit her lip and went silent.

Kazuya stood there, bewildered by her fierce will, so fierce, in fact, as to be stubborn. He could feel her determination not to leave without a fight.

He recalled her half-brother, Inspector Grevil de Blois. He would visit his intelligent, petite but beautiful sister in St. Marguerite Academy’s conservatory but would never make eye contact with her.

One of the horror stories prevalent in the academy said that Victorique de Blois was a Gray Wolf. Avril Bradley spoke about her in a voice that was a mix of fear and wonder.

Even now that they had come to know each other, Kazuya's little beautiful friend was still a mystery to him.

Something small and hard hit Kazuya on the back of his head.

Holding his head, he turned around to see his little beautiful friend, Victorique de Blois, trying to throw something from her rocking chair. He looked down at the floor and saw many round macaroons in golden wrappers scattered about. It was apparent that she had been throwing them for a while now.

"What are you doing?" Kazuya asked. "You're making a mess again!"

"I couldn't quite hit you."

"Who's going to pick them up?"

"You, of course."

"Why me?!"

Kazuya picked up all the scattered macaroons and brought them to Victorique.

His mind was a mess—he felt concern for this strange girl, annoyance for being pushed around, and there was an unfamiliar feeling that he couldn't quite understand. He tried to put these mixed emotions into words.

"I don't like this place, Victorique. Let's get out of here and return to the academy."

There was no reply.

"I'm worried about you. We're in a strange village, and there are wolves out there."

"..."

Kazuya picked up a jug and poured water into a red glass. "All this worrying's made me super thirsty."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Whose fault do you think that is?! For the record, *you're* the one making me worried."

Victorique played ignorant.

Furious, Kazuya looked down at his hand. He was pouring water, but he heard something plop. He peered into the glass and almost screamed. Victorique shot him a dubious look.

In the glass was a small amount of water and something round with a black portion in the center.

An eye.

The room suddenly felt chilly.

It was a little smaller than a human eye, presumably belonging to an animal.

The eyeball moved with the water, the pupil turning in his direction. Kazuya's own eyes locked with it. He almost shrieked, then noticed Victorique's gaze, and somehow managed to keep his composure and put down the glass.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Uh, nothing. Just a bug. I'll ask Harminia later to change the water."

Kazuya put the jug back on the table. His heart was drumming in his chest.

The sun was slowly setting, and a quiet darkness that signaled the end of the day blanketed the nameless village. Through the curtained window of Victorique's room, one could see the setting sun blazing as it sank behind a large oak tree, and then faded into the darkness. Once the sun had dipped below the horizon, the village turned jet-black, and only a veil of milky mist crept in the darkness, shifting in the faint breeze, just as it had during daytime.

The oaks' tangled branches were black skeletons clawing at the sky.

"I'm closing the curtains," Kazuya said, pulling the string hanging from the top of the window. The heavy, velvet curtains billowed then closed shut.

Victorique, sitting deep in her rocking chair, had been silent for a while now, lost in thought. She had been quiet ever since she returned to her room after a simple dinner with Sergius and the other guests. Whether she heard Kazuya or not, she gave no response when he called out to her. With a sigh, Kazuya returned to his original spot—her mini-suitcase, which he had used as a chair—and sat down.

A knock came at the door, but before he could answer, it slowly opened. Kazuya half-rose to his feet. With a faint rustling of clothes, someone entered the room.

It was Harminia. She was holding a large brass container full of hot water in both hands.

"It's for the bath," she said in a low voice. "I'll mix it with the water."

She opened the flimsy door to the bathroom, set the bucket down, and quickly tried to leave.

Kazuya frowned. Harminia's footsteps made no sound at all, almost as if no one was there.

He found it to be in sharp contrast to the red-haired nun, Mildred. Whenever Mildred walked, she produced loud footsteps that even large men could not make. Harminia's footsteps, on the other hand, like her presence, were faint and unidentifiable.

As she exited the room, Harminia suddenly turned around. Her eyes darted from Kazuya to Victorique.

Slowly, her small, colorless lips parted. "If you need anything, please ring the bell."

"Okay."

The door closed.

Suddenly in a good mood, Victorique jumped down from the rocking chair and headed for the bathroom, hopping around as if dancing on the floor. Kazuya watched her curiously as she filled the bathtub—cream-colored with brass cabriole legs—with hot and regular water. She knelt down on the black-and-white checkered tile floor and peered cheerfully into the bathtub, which was filled to the brim. She looked like she would start humming a tune at any moment.

"What's up with you?" Kazuya asked.

Victorique raised her head. "I like baths," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Really? Hmm. I see. I guess it's true. Traveling *does* reveal people's surprising sides. You like beautiful things and baths."

"..."

"And books and candy, right? Frills and lace. Why are you giving me that dangerous look?"

"Can you not talk like you know me?"

"That's uncalled for!"

Victorique ignored him and took out some bathroom items—a sparkling ivory comb, a rose-scented soap, and a gold-rimmed makeup mirror—from her luggage. She turned around and looked at Kazuya.

"What?"

"A lady is taking a bath. Go away."

“Oh. S-Sorry!”

Kazuya stood up. He dashed to the door and looked over his shoulder.
“I’ll be in the hallway. If anything weird happens, just call me.”

No replay came.

Kazuya went out into the hallway, closed the door, and sighed.

Alone in the hallway, he felt a sudden surge of uneasiness. A mysterious village deep in the mountains and its equally mysterious villagers. He didn’t really know much about the four people they came with. The radio that had suddenly stopped, the eyeball submerged in the water...

The more uneasy he became, the more he felt the hallway shifting and the walls and ceiling closing in on him from all sides. Kazuya shook his head wildly, trying not to let the nerves get the better of him.

Victorique will say she’s never going back. I gotta make sure there’s no danger lurking about.

He heard the faint sound of water from inside the room. *Splash. Splash. Splash.* It sounded more like a small cat getting into the water than a human being.

Next came Victorique’s distant voice.

“Whoa~, whoa~, whoa~...”

“Victorique!” Kazuya barged into the room. He listened carefully.

“I love baths~!”

“Huh?”

“It warms me up inside~!”

Is she singing?

Kazuya felt ashamed for panicking. He leaned against the door. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Singing.”

“Man, you suck!”

A wave of fury traveled through the air and reached Kazuya. After a momentary silence, he turned to leave, when Victorique said in a low, rumbling voice, “You think I suck? Let’s hear you sing, then.”

“What? N-No way. It’s too embarrassing.”

“I said sing, Kujou.”

Unable to refuse, Kazuya regretted making fun of Victorique. He placed his hands on his hips and began singing a children’s song that he used to sing back in his hometown.

When Kazuya sang the song in his childish voice, his mother and older sister would clap their hands and comment, “You’re such a good singer,” or “Your father and brothers can’t sing, but you can.” After his father and older brothers caught him singing, he got chided for not being manly enough, and so Kazuya became a man who never hummed even when he was alone. He had not sung for a while, so he got a little excited.

As he was singing his heart out, a loud bang came at the bathroom door.
“Silence!”

“Y-You’re the one who told me to sing!” Teary-eyed, Kazuya stopped singing. “Well? I’m good, aren’t I?” he murmured.

There was no reply.

Dejected, Kazuya went silent.

The room was quiet once more, save for the faint sound of water, Kazuya’s heartbeat, and the rustling of the velvet curtains.

From time to time, white mist wandered into the room from outside before dissipating.

It was quiet. Wolves howled in the distance. Birds flapped their wings.

Kazuya’s eyes caught a flicker of motion. He lifted his head. He was sure he saw something move. He surveyed the room, but nothing had changed.

That can’t be right. I definitely saw movement.

A canopied bed. Mini-suitcase. A rocking chair, and a fragile turntable. Wardrobe. Velvet curtains. A mirror fixed onto the wall.

A mirror? Kazuya stared at it.

Something was moving in the mirror. The bed—the feather comforter on top of it. It had been flat and empty until now, but for some reason it was slightly fluffed up.

Kazuya turned around. The bed was as flat as before.

He looked into the mirror. The comforter in the reflection was slowly swelling up.

The lights in the room flickered and dimmed. In the mirror, the comforter was growing bigger, to the point that it seemed like there was a person inside.

Kazuya let out a shriek. He was about to make a run for the door when he realized that Victorique was still inside. He scurried to the bathroom and pounded the door.

“Victorique! Are you okay in there?!”

No answer.

Kazuya recalled the malfunctioning radio and the eyeball in the jug.

Something's wrong. Something's seriously wrong. Victorique!

The lights went out, and darkness enveloped the room.

Kazuya stuck to the bathroom door to protect Victorique. He called her name repeatedly, but there was no answer.

Suddenly, the lights came back on. The bed in the reflection had returned to normal.

It was not until about ten minutes later that Victorique emerged from the bathroom.

“Can’t you be quiet?” she said. “What on earth was that racket?”

She was wearing a white satin round cap and a puffy nightgown with white frills and aqua-blue lace. Half of her long blonde hair was hidden in the cap, the other half spilling down her back.

Kazuya was slumped down on the rocking chair.

“That’s my chair,” Victorique huffed.

Kazuya stood up and told her about the strange phenomena that had just occurred. Victorique yawned, seemingly disinterested. She carefully put her toiletries away and looked for her bag of macaroons.

“Let’s leave in the morning,” Kazuya said.

Victorique looked at him in surprise. “Why?”

“Because it’s dangerous. Weird things just keep happening. Something’s wrong with this village. Didn’t you find it creepy how the radio just stopped working?”

“Radio?” Victorique groaned. “What a pain,” she mumbled.

“Wh-What did you say?”

“It was a trick.”

“No way!”

Victorique yawned loudly, and reluctantly added, “Do you remember what else was on the chest where the radio was placed?”

“On the chest? Uh, there was the radio, a statue of Mary, and a decorative compass...”

“The compass has a magnet,” she said with a yawn. “When there’s a magnet nearby, devices that use electricity go haywire. I don’t know if it was just a coincidence or if someone put it there on purpose.”

“Wait...” Kazuya frowned. “Did you know all along?”

“Of course.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything?! We were all scared.”

“I was preoccupied with other things.”

“Why, you...”

Victorique was sitting in the rocking chair, staring at Kazuya. She then stood up, and said, “You are one selfish man, Kujou.”

“Right back at you!”

“Fine. I’ll explain it so even a selfish simpleton like you can understand.”

“Sue me.”

“In exchange, you will stop whining about going home. I am *not* leaving.”

“O-Okay.”

Victorique walked out into the hallway, and Kazuya tried to follow her.

“You stay there,” she said.

“...Got it.”

“Keep your eyes closed and reflect on what you did. Don’t open them until I say so.”

“Reflect on what?!”

Kazuya reluctantly closed his eyes. He sensed Victorique leaving and the door closing behind her.

Silence.

He heard something rattling and shaking from somewhere very close. Kazuya was desperately holding back the urge to open his eyes.

After a while, he heard Victorique’s voice from very close by, when she was supposed to have left the room.

“You can open your eyes now.”

Kazuya opened his eyes. The mirror on the wall in front of him showed the top of Victorique’s head. A white satin cap and a bit of sparkling golden hair peeked out. He could also hear her voice.

“Do you understand now, you simpleton?”

“You completely lost me. Where are you?”

He peered into the mirror and found that it had been removed, leaving a gaping hole. The next room—Kazuya’s room—was symmetrical to Victorique’s. She was stretching her body up to show her face through the square hole.

Acknowledging that her face couldn’t reach no matter how hard she tried, Victorique scuttled somewhere and came back with a small box to use as a footstool. It looked light, but she was carrying it with clenched teeth, as though it was heavy.

When she finally got on the box, Victorique was as tall as Kazuya. She poked her head out of the hole.

“See?”

“Huh?”

When Kazuya still had no clue what she was getting at, Victorique stamped her foot.

“To put it into words, someone entered this room and removed the mirror. What you saw was not a reflection. It was someone hiding inside the bed in this room to scare you.”

“...”

Kazuya’s gaze was fixed on Victorique. This was a rare occasion. Because she was on a footstool, they were about the same height. They were staring into each other’s eyes.

“Do you get it?” Victorique asked, eyes wide open.

Kazuya’s face clouded over.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” she asked.

“That means someone did it.”

“Yes. But it’s okay.”

“It’s *not* okay!”

Victorique’s eyes widened even more. Kazuya kicked the floor to vent his emotions.

“A ghost is fine. It just means this house is haunted. But a human being? Besides, this is your room, not mine. Someone did this on purpose to scare you. Am I wrong?”

“...”

“Victorique...”

“...”

“Who would do this and why?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that it must be one of the villagers. But I can guess why. It’s because I am Cordelia’s daughter.” Victorique’s voice was low.

Her small face was expressionless, her eyes dark. Kazuya regarded her visage.

“Was it someone who believed that Cordelia was a criminal?” she said in a trembling voice. “Or was it the real culprit, afraid that I’d learn the truth?”

“Victorique...”

The villagers’ glassy green eyes flashed through Kazuya’s mind. Raising their weapons to drive them away. Sergius showing up and allowing them to enter the village. Harminia’s exposed eyeballs when she saw Victorique, blabbering about Cordelia’s crimes. And Ambrose, who spoke amiably but suddenly turned cold depending on the topic.

It felt like Sergius was behind it all. He was trying to protect the village, while Victorique was trying to discover the truth.

“But I am not leaving,” Victorique insisted.

“It’s dangerous!”

They both stamped their feet, glaring at each other.

“But you...” Victorique paused, wondering if she should say the words. Then with a serious look, she added, “You said you’d protect me. You followed me here without a single piece of luggage.”

“Of course I will!”

They held each other’s gaze.

The usual friendly atmosphere between them was gone. They were staring down at each other with fierce looks, as if they would engage in a duel at any moment.

Suddenly, the door to Victorique’s room flung open.

Standing there was Mildred, her red curly hair bouncing. She looked furious.

“Listen to this!” she huffed, stamping into the room.

Kazuya recalled how Harminia’s footsteps barely made any sound. *They’re polar opposites*, he thought. When she noticed Victorique peeking

out of the square hole, she chuckled and poked the girl's nose. Victorique gave a jerk like a kitten frightened by an adult, and blinked repeatedly.

"What are you doing, little one?"

Victorique reddened.

Is she self-conscious about her height? Kazuya wondered.

Without a hint of guilt on her face, Mildred started talking. "Those men are a bunch of idiots!" she said, tramping around the room. "Alan, Derek, and Raoul. I hung around with them because I thought Derek was loaded."

"R-Really? Only because he's rich?"

"I love money!" she snapped, for some odd reason. "I love money more than good wine and pretty dresses. I love it more than anything else!"

Kazuya and Victorique exchanged glances.

Kazuya recalled the Dresden plate that she presumably stole at the bazaar.

Until now, Mildred was crude and ill-mannered, but once the subject of money came up, her vibe changed drastically. There was a strong, sweet scent coming from her, as if she had put on perfume, and her entire body was oozing sex appeal.

What is wrong with her?

Kazuya stared at Mildred, who kept repeating the word "money" over and over.

"You buy wines and dresses with money, though," Victorique interjected.

Mildred pretended not to hear. "So anyway, they wanted to go check the place out. It's the eve of the Midsummer Festival and the villagers are on edge, but they went to visit the cathedral. No one's supposed to be there at this time of the year. Rules and what not. I went with them anyway. Do you know what they did? They took a precious ornamental vase and dropped it into a basin full of holy water." She picked up the red glass sitting next to the pitcher and gulped it down without looking inside. "They begged to see it, but when they did, they laughed at how the villagers were cherishing junk. The villagers got mad, and they dropped it! And it happened three times, once for each of them. I was surprised the vase didn't break. The village chief was practically steaming. He said that they only value what's new and can't appreciate the real value of things." She coughed. "Th-There was something round in the water."

Kazuya gasped. *The eyeball!* He decided not to say anything.
“It was probably candy or something,” he said, and Mildred nodded.

After Mildred stomped out of the room, it was silent once more.

Victorique came back down the hallway from the room next door.

They didn’t talk much. Kazuya thoroughly checked the lock on the door, moved the wardrobe in front of the mirror to prevent anything from coming in from the next room, and closed the windows tight.

“I’ll stay here right by the door,” he said. “If anyone comes in, I’ll take care of them.”

“How brave of you.”

“I’m being serious! For the record, you’re the one being targeted.”

Kazuya placed the rocking chair in front of the door, slumped down, and closed his eyes.

He couldn’t sleep. Being the most sensitive one in the family, Kazuya had a hard time falling asleep if the pillows were changed. All the more so if he tried sleeping on a chair.

When Victorique heard him mumbling, she turned around, looking pleased. “Do you remember the nice cot I had in my luggage?”

“By luggage, do you mean the stupidly large, family-sized suitcase you use for moving overseas? Then yes, I remember.”

“Y-You’re the one who’s stupid. My sagacious brain deemed that to be the minimum necessary baggage. Since you left it after your arrogant lecturing, you take responsibility and sleep in a rocking chair.”

“I’m pretty sure the vase and tea set were unnecessary,” he rebutted.

A macaroon flew through the air and onto the floor. Kazuya picked it up and put it back where it belonged.

“Victorique?”

When he looked up, Victorique was absorbed in her thought. She wasn’t looking at Kazuya anymore. He sighed and sat down on the rocking chair.

As the night deepened, the manor fell silent.

Kazuya dimmed the lamp a little and decided to sleep.

Victorique had long since laid down on the large canopied bed, breathing softly. Kazuya closed his eyes, forcing himself to sleep.

He glanced at Victorique. He could see her small head. She was lying face down, her little face buried in the huge, soft pillow.

“What a weird way to sleep.”

Her faint breathing echoed endlessly. She looked more like a furry puppy slipping into bed than a human being.

A grandfather clock started chiming downstairs.

Dong. Dong. Dong.

Kazuya started counting. One. Two. When he reached twelve, the ringing stopped. Realizing that it was already twelve o’clock in the evening, he decided he had to sleep now.

With fear in his heart, Kazuya slowly closed his eyes.

Monologue 3

In the middle of the night, I awoke to a presence.

The manor was quiet; the only sound was the faint breeze coming from outside the window.

Quietly, I approached the door and strained my ears.

“...while the festival is going on...”

I could hear men’s whispers coming from the end of the hallway.

“No one will notice. Not even the villagers.”

“Yeah, no doubt.”

They were having a secret discussion.

“We can transport them by car once we get down the mountain.”

I could feel anger rising within me.

I suspected this to be the case, and I was right. Unaware of an eavesdropper, the men continued discussing their plans for tomorrow.

“If we do it during the festival, the villagers won’t notice. The cathedral will be unoccupied for a certain time tomorrow.”

“We head back down the mountain, and then...”

And then what?

Chapter 4: Red Turnip Lanterns and the Winter Man

Dawn was slowly breaking over the nameless village. Kazuya was slumped in a rocking chair in the corner, awakening from his shallow sleep and falling asleep again. This went on repeatedly.

Every time he woke up, he saw Victorique sleeping in a different area of the large canopied bed, in a different position. Barely he wondered when she moved.

The banging of drums announced the breaking of dawn.

Boom!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

It was followed by the sound of a flute. High and thin, it seemed to slice through the darkness of dawn.

Kazuya bolted upright. When he got up, Victorique, dressed in her nightgown, was just getting off the bed. She rushed to the window and glanced at Kazuya behind her.

Kazuya looked drowsy, while Victorique was already fully awake; she had the same quiet but sharp eyes when they met at the conservatory. Most of her long, golden hair cascaded down from the white satin cap, billowing like a golden stream.

“Good morning, Kujou,” she said.

“Good morning, Victorique. What was that just now?”

“No idea. If I had to guess...” Victorique pulled on a string hanging from the ceiling.

The heavy velvet curtains drew open.

Outside the window was a completely different scenery.

Unlike yesterday, when a milky mist obscured most of the area save for the stone balcony and a large oak tree, this morning, despite still being dawn, the air was clear, with great visibility. The weather was fine, and the

wind was dry. The sound of drums shook the air, followed by the whistling of flutes.

Several colored banners, all bearing the wolf emblem painted in black, fluttered in the breeze.

Someone was spraying water—holy water, most likely—into the morning sky. Droplets fell onto the stones of the balcony.

Whips cracked and blanks were fired.

“I would guess...” Victorique said.

“The Midsummer Festival has begun,” Kazuya added.

“Indeed.”

They exchanged glances, and ran out onto the balcony. Leaning over the mossy stone railing, they watched the scene outside.

A shaking, bright-red mass was entering the square. No matter how much they strained their eyes, they could not make out what it was. It was a large float, but it was burning bright-orange like flames.

Villagers were parading around the square, shouting. It was hard to believe that they were extremely quiet just yesterday.

As they goggled at the square, a small knock sounded on the door. Kazuya answered and returned to the room.

He opened the door to find a young man with long golden hair standing there. He was taller than most of the villagers, with strikingly handsome features and clear eyes. Ambrose, the village chief’s assistant.

“I heard you guys talking when I passed by,” he said. “I thought you were awake.”

Ambrose was carrying curious items in his hands. A human-sized paper-mâché wrapped in ochre-colored cloth, and a wooden mask with a horrifying black face carved into it. Kazuya studied the objects.

Ambrose laughed. “These are paper-mâché and mask for the festival. Never seen much of these?”

“Nope.”

“To me, your belongings are much more uncommon.”

Ambrose peeked into the room a little and glanced at their belongings. He then stared at Kazuya’s face and reached out to it. Kazuya backed away quickly. He didn’t like having his cheeks pinched or his hair pulled.

Woken by the sound of conversation, the doors to the other rooms opened one after another. Alan stepped out drowsily, stroking his beard.

Derek was wearing a silk nightwear; one look revealed it as luxurious, but it was wrinkled, as though he'd been tossing and turning in his sleep. Raoul's large body also came out sluggishly.

The door to Mildred's room opened last. With footsteps so loud that it was hard to believe they belonged to a woman, she stepped out into the hallway. Her red, curly hair swayed.

Victorique left the balcony and trotted toward them.

Ambrose led Kazuya and the others to the square. "As Elder Sergius said yesterday," he began, "the Midsummer Festival is a celebration of summer's bountiful harvest and a ritual of defeating and burning winter. We then call the spirits of our ancestors to witness our abundance."

The manor was practically empty at this point. Almost all the villagers had gathered in the square.

"We don't want to leave the cathedral unattended, so a few people are over there. The rest are all in the square."

"It's way different from yesterday," Kazuya remarked.

Ambrose laughed. "We were busy with preparations. It looked like the red turnips weren't going to be ready in time."

"Red turnips?"

"The lights on the float. Look."

When the group arrived at the square, their eyes widened in surprise as they stared at the huge, round, flaming floats.

Countless round and small orange-glowing objects were attached all over the floats. A closer inspection revealed them to be hollowed-out red turnips with various patterns carved on the outside. There were tiny candles inside, their flames dancing as the floats moved. The floats themselves crawled all over the place like flickering flames.

"So pretty," Victorique breathed.



Ambrose nodded happily. “The villagers were busy carving these. And I was making this paper-mâché. Had a hard time since I’m all thumbs.” He gently placed the ochre-colored mummy on the float.

“What’s the papier-mache for?” Kazuya asked.

“It’s called the Winter Man. At noon, the villagers dress up in costumes and stage a dramatic battle between the Winter Army and the Summer Army. The Winter Army wears brown clothes, while the Summer Army wears blue. When the Summer Army eventually wins the battle and defeats the Winter Army, it sets fire to the Winter Man’s float. We then eat, drink, and dance to celebrate Summer’s victory.”

“I see...”

“After that, the cathedral will be cleared of people. The cathedral is the gateway to the afterlife and serves as the pathway for our ancestors who return to witness our bountiful harvest. At the end of the festival, our ancestors wear this mask...” Ambrose lifted a macabre mask, a product of his painstaking labor. “...and dance in joy for the harvest. They then speak in an incomprehensible language. We believe it to be the language of the afterlife.”

Harminia was coming from behind them, her eyes bulging. She stared at the mask Ambrose was holding and suddenly grinned from ear to ear. She seemed satisfied with the mask.

“Looks great,” she said in a barely audible whisper.

Ambrose seemed happy for the praise. “I’ll be wearing the mask this year.”

“You’re a candidate for the next village chief, after all,” Harminia said. The group looked puzzled.

“The village chief has a younger assistant,” she added in an even lower voice. “When the village chief dies, his assistant becomes the next chief. Elder Sergius was also Elder Theodore’s assistant. In other words, Elder Sergius has a very high opinion of Ambrose.”

“Oh...”

The group studied Ambrose. The young man’s elegant face reddened.

He shook his head in embarrassment. “It’s partly because there’s fewer youth among the villagers. Not a lot of children in the village, in fact.”

The floats slowly started spinning around. They watched several red turnips spin, tracing red lines in the air.

“This is stupid,” Alan spat.

Ambrose gasped, and Harminia’s eyes bulged.

It just so happened that the sound of drums and flutes stopped then and a momentary silence fell on the square. All the villagers turned around, their dark eyes sweeping over the outsiders, searching for the owner of the voice.

Alan had been grumbling nonstop since entering the village, but never before had he attracted so much attention. The man himself was surprised, but his pride prevented himself from backing down.

“I can’t believe people still believe in these ancient superstitions.

Secluded place, my ass. Definitely the village of the Gray Wolves. This place is a joke!”

Derek, who usually backed him up, stood silent next to him.

“Am I right, Raoul?” Alan said.

The big man shrank back, scratching his chin. “U-Um... yeah.”

“Spirits of your ancestors? Good one. They ain’t coming back. All this ridiculous nonsense so early in the morning.”

Derek stopped him before he could say any more. “Yeah, I get it. It’s quite loud out here. Let’s head back to our rooms and play some poker, yeah?”

Alan nodded. The three men plodded back to their rooms.

“Please wait,” Harminia said in a low but carrying voice, stopping them.

Villagers were gathered behind the maid, glowering at the three men. It seemed as if they had fused with Harminia. Their faces were devoid of expression, and they were motionless, eyes bulging open. Their outdated attire made them look like ghosts.

Alan turned around and gave a start. His confidence faded. “Wh-What!?”

“If you’re going to mock our village, then you may leave.”

“A mere maid talking back to a guest?”

“The spirits of the dead...”

“The spirits of the dead, what? Say it.”

“They do return.”

“Bullshit!”

“They come from the night sky, pass through the cathedral and onto the square, and speak in the language of the afterlife. Their words are

incomprehensible to us. But nothing can be hidden from the spirits of the dead. There's meaning to the Midsummer Festival."

The look on Harminia's face said she believed in the festival from the bottom of her heart. She turned to Ambrose and shot him a glare, urging him to say something as well. Ambrose did not have the same unwavering look as Harminia, but she didn't seem to notice.

Ambrose stopped Alan before he could continue. "Dear guests. You are entitled to your opinion, but if you're going to interrupt the Midsummer Festival, I will have to ask you to leave."

"I-I don't want to leave," Alan murmured.

For some reason, he was getting flustered. It was apparent that they didn't want to leave the village. The three men shared looks and discussed things over.

"You always pick a fight wherever you go," Derek rebuked. Raoul said nothing.

After a while, Alan raised his hands. "Fine. I get it. We won't interrupt the festival. We'll just stay put in our rooms, okay?"

Ambrose smiled and bowed. Harminia kept glaring at them as they left. The young assistant seemed to have lost some of his energy.

"We actually have a slightly similar tradition in my country," Kazuya said in an attempt to cheer him up.

"Your country?"

"Yes. It's an island nation located all the way across the sea. We have this old tradition of welcoming back our ancestors in the summer. I don't really believe in it, but I do visit their graves with my family and make offerings."

"Oh... tell me more."

Ambrose hounded Kazuya with questions, so he spent the next several minutes explaining about his country, world geography, and the state of the world. To his surprise, the young man didn't even know about the Great War, which ended only a few years ago. He knew about airplanes and remembered how they flew so high back then.

He was living the life of a recluse.

But while he lived a medieval lifestyle, Ambrose was surprisingly quick on the uptake; he understood many things in just a few minutes of conversation. And like a young man with a thirst for knowledge, he asked

the right questions one after another and absorbed Kazuya's answers. His clear green eyes sparkled with curiosity.

What a smart guy! Kazuya was genuinely impressed. *I can see where the legend of the Gray Wolf comes from. This feels like the traveler's account that Victorique showed me, where he met a young male wolf in the mountains. Intelligent and silent Gray Wolves...*

Ambrose's questions went on forever, but his thirst for knowledge was never quenched.

After taking a breather, he said, somewhat embarrassed, "When I was a child, a descendant came to the village. A man named Brian Roscoe. I asked him a lot of questions too, and got an earful from Elder Sergius afterwards."

"Oh... The guy who installed electricity in the village, right?"

"Yes. But he left as soon as he finished making arrangements for the construction," he said sadly.

After the commotion, the villagers returned to their respective homes. They had a quick breakfast before gathering again in the square a little past noon.

The lights of the floats were extinguished. The colored banners surrounding the square swayed in the strong breeze. The crack of whips and firing of blanks continued.

The skit that Ambrose had mentioned was about to begin. Kazuya went to Alan and his friends' rooms to invite them to watch, but they seemed to be in a bad mood. Although he could sense they were inside, they did not respond. Mildred said that there was an awkward atmosphere between the three, so they stayed in their own rooms without talking to each other.

Mildred also seemed uninterested. "I can watch from the balcony," she had said.

In the end, only Kazuya and Victorique headed to the square, holding hands along the way.

When they arrived, girls in red skirts were just running out onto the square. The girls stopped in the middle and bowed, carrying baskets in their hand.

Ambrose passed by, talking about various matters to Sergius, who walked too slow. When he noticed Kazuya and Victorique watching from a corner, he turned and said, "It's dangerous over there!"

"Dangerous how?" Kazuya asked.

“Well, not *that* dangerous. But it’ll hurt a bit.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

Ambrose walked away with a mischievous smile on his face. Kazuya looked next to him and saw Victorique frowning.

It'll hurt? Wait a sec... Oh, no!

Kazuya remembered that Victorique was sensitive to pain. He pulled her hand and left the spot. Victorique continued watching the villagers as they scurried around the square. She looked up at Kazuya as he dragged her away.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked.

“I’m not exactly sure.”

Once they had left their spot, the girls all squealed. They put their hands in the baskets, grabbed the hard hazelnuts inside, and held their hands high in the air.

“One, two...” they cried, then started throwing hazelnuts everywhere.

The villagers looked on with laughter. The nuts landed on the spot where Kazuya and Victorique had been moments ago. Just then, a young bearded man wearing a hat and glasses wandered by.

“It’s Alan,” Kazuya said. “I invited him earlier. Huh, I guess he’s curious about the festival, after all.”

The girls were making a lot of noise, singing a fertility song and throwing hazelnuts at a man passing by. The man jumped up in pain as he retreated. Laughing hysterically, the girls looked around to see if anyone would pass by next. A young male villager approached them on purpose, and they gladly threw nuts at him. Men ran away. Squeals and screams filled the square as they repeated the routine over and over.

“Wow... That looks painful,” Kazuya muttered.

Thank heavens for Ambrose’s warning. If we stayed in that spot, Victorique would have been in a lot of pain.

He glanced at Victorique. She continued observing the villagers.

After emptying their baskets, the young girls retreated with laughter. Then, young men divided themselves into two groups—the Winter Army, dressed in brown and riding horses, and the Summer Army, dressed in blue and carrying spears—and started performing a war dance.

Girls cheered for the Summer Army, while the men danced around them. It was a long dance.

When the Summer Army finally won, the Winter Army dispersed, and a young man at the center of the Summer Army declared victory.

“Wait, that voice...”

Kazuya realized then that it was Ambrose. The young man looked different from any other youth in the village. The villagers were Gray Wolves with glassy eyes that rejected change, while Ambrose was full of youthful brilliance.

Dressed in blue, Ambrose proudly proclaimed Summer’s victory and this year’s bountiful harvest, waving the torch in his hand around.

“Begone, Winter Man!” he roared, holding the torch over the float parked in the middle of the square.

On top of the float was an ochre-colored papier-mâché piece made by Ambrose that represented the Winter Man. Both the float and the papier-mâché were made of highly-flammable materials. When he dropped the torch, flames instantly engulfed the float and the papier-mache.

Just then, something stood up on top of the float.

Ambrose let out a shriek, his face contorted in shock. He continued screaming with his mouth wide open.

The human-sized papier-mache had stood up and spun around. It kept spinning and spinning while holding its head with both hands, until eventually it fell flat on its face.

“A person?!” Ambrose’s voice carried over the flames. “Let go of me! That’s a person right there!”

Shaking off his companions, he jumped on the float and tackled it, causing it to crash sideways. The entire square shook. Crushed red turnips oozed reddish-purple juice that soaked into the cobblestones.

Someone rushed to the well and returned with a bucket full of water, pouring it over the burning, writhing papier-mâché.

The fire died. The papier-mâché groaned for a while, but then slowly and gradually stopped moving.

“It’s a person,” Ambrose mumbled, stunned. “Soft like a human body. It’s not the papier-mache I made. It changed into a human being!”

A fellow youth pulled Ambrose away, and the young assistant fell on his buttocks.

“It’s a person... Remove the cloth!”

The villagers opened up a path as Sergius slowly stepped forward.

With trembling hands, the village chief peeled away the half-burned cloth on the body. When he removed the covering on the face, a massive shock spread through the square.

“I knew it,” someone mumbled.

On the ground lay a dead man with eyes wide open, his expression one of pure agony.

Alan.

Kazuya tried to cover Victorique’s face with his hands so she wouldn’t see, but she shook him off.

He looked at her with surprise and a little bit of anger. Her calm eyes surveyed the square.

Kazuya followed her gaze as well, and Harminia’s face caught his attention first. The maid looked surprised, but there was a faint smile on her face. Ambrose staggered back up his feet with the help of the others. His face was twisted in shock. Sergius was examining Alan’s body with a grim expression. The villagers were silent as they looked down at Alan’s body.

Loud footsteps came from the manor. Kazuya knew right away that it was Mildred. Her raid hair bounced as she came running.

“I was watching from the balcony of my room,” she said. “Was that a person burning?”

As she approached the crowd, she noticed Alan lying on the ground.

“What? This is horrible!” she cried in a shaky voice.

Derek and Raoul arrived seconds later. When they saw Alan’s condition, they gasped.

“What happened here?” Derek asked, his voice trembling.

“I don’t know,” Sergius said.

Raoul just shuddered silently, but Derek started yelling.

“What did you do?! You won’t get away with this!”

“This was an accident,” Sergius said firmly, regarding Derek’s rageful face. “This imbecile swapped himself with the papier-mache while no one was looking.”

“What did you just call him?”

"He probably wanted to disrupt the festival. He didn't know he would be set on fire." He looked at Alan's body with disdain. "What a foolish guest."

"There's no way!" Derek snapped. He was shaking from anger. His already high-pitched voice was almost cracking.

"It can't be!" he managed. "We knew! This man here explained the event to us." He pointed at Ambrose. "He said that at the very end, you would set fire to the papier-mache."

Sergius shook his head. "I believe he was going to jump out of the way right before he caught fire."

"That's ridiculous!"

He looked around at the faces of the villagers, but none of them wanted to make eye contact. They seemed to believe Sergius' words without a trace of doubt. Derek let out a groan of despair and sank down on the ground.

"Elder Sergius," Ambrose mumbled. "I don't think this man could've done that."

"What?"

"Just a few moments ago, when the girls were throwing hazelnuts, this young man passed by and ran away when he got hit. He hasn't come to the square since then, and we have a lot of eyes here."

"What are you saying?"

"It's impossible for him to have switched places with the papier-mache."

Sergius' glare hushed Ambrose.

The villagers stirred. Glassy, doubtful eyes rested on the village chief.

Irritated, Sergius shot Ambrose a terrifying look. "Don't say any more. Have you forgotten that talkativeness is the sin of a fool?!"

"I'm... truly sorry." Ambrose hung his head low.

"What's going on?! Say something!" Derek bellowed.

Startled by his voice, birds took off from the square and disappeared into the mist.

The rustling of wings faded into the distance.

The square was silent. None answered Derek's question.

Monologue 4

Serves you right.

I tried my best not to show it on my face. I had to appear sad, surprised, shocked.

Fortunately, no one seemed to notice. I feared that I might have screwed up, but it seems that my worries were unfounded.

After hearing what he said last night, I could not allow him to live any longer. I have my own plans, and they were on the way.

I'll kill the other guy as well.

The only one stealing that thing and driving away is me. Not them.
Not them.

Chapter 5: A Secret Sleeps in the Forest

It was a little past noon when a carriage arrived at the valley where the nameless village was located. It had come from Horovitz, a town at the foot of the mountain, and had climbed the steep, thorn-covered mountain road.

The village was so disturbed by the unexpected death of the guest that it suspended its Midsummer festivities. Villagers, including the village chief, had gathered in the dining room of the gray manor for a discussion. When a young man standing guard on the turret noticed the carriage, he lowered the drawbridge with the others to welcome the new guest.

A foppish young man with blond hair and blue eyes, clothed in a fine silk shirt, silver cuffs sparkling on his wrists, struck an arrogant pose as he looked up at the drawbridge.

Slowly he crossed the drawbridge.

The young men on lookout watched the new guest from above, dumbfounded by his strange hair shaped like a bent drill.

In the gray manor, Victorique de Blois used the commotion to sneak into a room that was off-limits to outsiders. The new guest was, in fact, Grevil de Blois, and he came here in pursuit of his petite and beautiful, yet mysterious little sister.

She found herself in a room down the dark first-floor hallway—the study where the murder took place twenty years ago.

The study was quiet.

Dust had accumulated on the bookshelves and desks, and sunlight streaming in through the half-open, blue velvet curtains had tarnished the floorboards in places. No one had entered the room in some time, it seemed.

Victorique gently opened the door and stepped in. She coughed as her small and light footsteps caused dust to rise. Holding her breath, she surveyed the study.

It was a small room, furnished with a writing desk, a huge bookshelf, and a large chair with curved legs. An iron candlestick sat on top of a chest. The desk, chair, and everything else was big and lavish for such a small room.

A long display shelf had been built into one of the walls, and inside the glass-fronted cases were a variety of antique weapons, presumably used by knights in the Middle Ages. Heavy spears made of iron and sharpened oak branches, long swords, among others were crammed into the shelf.

Next to it was a large grandfather clock. The fact that it was working indicated that it was being maintained. The pendulum was swinging idly. The dial was old and faded, but still discernible.

Victorique stopped and stared at a spot on the floor.

Her small lips parted.

“There was a body lying here.”

Her gaze shifted a little.

“And gold coins lay scattered over here.”

She closed her eyes.

“Why was there a pile of gold coins on the floor? There must be a reason. There must be. This is a fragment. A fragment of chaos. It will form a part of the whole piece. Think... Think!”

Her green eyes slowly opened. She glanced back at the door.

“And Cordelia came in,” she mumbled. “Opened the locked door. There was no one else but her. The time was supposedly twelve o’clock midnight, but it’s not completely established. Then Cordelia found the body. What about the window?”

She scurried to the window, raising dust in her wake. She flung the curtains open, and dust billowed like smoke. She looked out the window and shook her head.

Outside was a sheer cliff. She could hear the muddy stream rushing past far below.

“Not here,” she murmured. “They didn’t pass through here. The culprit must have gone out the door. A murder took place in what should have been a completely ordinary study.”

Victorique clenched her pearly teeth. “Mom!” she mumbled.

“What are you doing?” said a soft and gentle voice.

Victorique gasped and turned around.

Harminia was standing there. She had opened the door without a sound. The maid stared down at the little intruder with a reproachful look. Victorique pursed her lips tight.



“Elder Sergius forbade anyone from entering this room,” Harminia said.

“Why is that?” Victorique asked.

“Why, you ask?” Harminia cocked her head, perplexed. She looked like a broken doll.

“Perhaps because there are things he doesn’t want other people knowing?” Victorique continued.

“What do you mean by that?”

“There is another truth hidden in the incident that took place in this study.”

“Heavens, no!” Harminia laughed.

Her chuckling continued for a while before Victorique cut her off.

“Sergius is a man who does not allow objections. I assume that no one could voice their opinion on his decisions as village chief, and that still continues to this day. But I wonder... Perhaps he forbade me from entering the study because deep inside, he feels that his theory was wrong? Or there are things that he doesn’t want others to know about. Am I wrong?”

Harminia’s laughter grew even higher. Eventually, her voice trailed off, and her pale, ghostly face showed signs of fear.

Her eyes bulged, the pupils hollow and blank, as though peering at nothingness. Red capillaries ran across the whites of her eyes. Shaking her head, Harminia let out a deep breath.

“What’s the matter?” Victorique asked.

The maid took another deep breath. “Actually, something’s been bothering me for a long time. I couldn’t really say it before.”

Victorique watched her intently.

Slowly Harminia approached her with silent footsteps. “I was in this manor the night of the incident,” she said in a low, reverberating voice. “I remember what happened that night and the subsequent commotion. But I was only six years old at the time. I was terrified of Cordelia and the crime she committed. When I was asked to accompany her during her fever dreams, I refused. I was scared. When the criminal was finally banished from the village with only a few belongings, I felt relieved. Afterwards, I got a fever. That’s how scared I was of Cordelia, of the criminal’s presence.” She then went silent.

The whites of her eyes grew wider, and the pupils moved. It was hard to tell where she was looking. She bent down and brought her face close to

Victorique's cheek.

"But even after Cordelia was banished, the misfortune didn't follow her out of the village. Over the next twenty years, the village changed little by little. It somehow lost its colors, like a lonely painting in black and white. And fewer children were being born. The misfortune remained in the village. Then a horrifying thought occurred to me. What if..." She did not continue.

"You think the criminal might still be in the village?" Victorique asked. Harminia's mouth was shut tight.

"Elder Sergius made a valid point," the maid continued. "It was easiest to believe that Cordelia was the culprit. The door to the study was locked from the inside, and only Elder Theodore and Cordelia had the key. There was no one else inside. No one but Cordelia would have been able to stab Elder Theodore. Of course, there are things we're not sure about. We don't know about the gold coins scattered on the floor, or the fact that everyone had varied testimonies about the time. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Cordelia was the closest to being the culprit."

"Hmm..."

"But!" Harminia suddenly exclaimed, her eyes bulging even further. "As I grew up, I realized that there was something wrong with this scenario. Elder Theodore was stabbed in the upper back. The dagger was said to have been buried to the hilt. But Elder Theodore was a grown man, while Cordelia was a fifteen-year-old girl. They had different heights."

With a bright smile, she put her hands together, raised them up, and swung them down from above as hard as she could. For one chilling moment, an invisible dagger glinted in the sunlight and pierced the afterimage of a man who had died twenty years before.

"She would've done it like this. But why did Cordelia go all the way behind Elder Theodore? Since she was shorter, she would have to exert a lot more effort to bury the dagger deep into the hilt."

"That's right."

"If I had to stab a man bigger than me, I would do it like this."

Harminia held the invisible dagger in front of her belly and charged straight forward. Her eyeballs moved, and she tilted her head.

"See?" she said, looking at Victorique.

"I agree."

Harminia suddenly turned quiet.

“Who killed him?” Victorique asked.

“I don’t know. I just thought that something was wrong.”

Harminia said no more and hurried out of the study. Victorique was left alone in the room, watching the maid as she went away.

“A peculiar way of stabbing someone,” Victorique murmured. “Gold coins scattered about. And the varied testimonies about the time...”

She shook her head. Sunlight pouring through the window made motes of dust in the air glitter. The only sound was the slow, rhythmical, ticking of the grandfather clock’s pendulum.

Click!

The grandfather clock started chiming.

Victorique’s eyes grew wide. She listened to the sound. A tinge of red touched her cheeks, and her expression brightened. She opened her small lips to say something.

Suddenly, a flapping of wings came from outside. Victorique looked up and glared out the window, annoyed for having her thoughts interrupted. Several white pigeons were flying past, soaring into the leaden sky.

Victorique’s expression turned somber. She was thinking.

Her emerald eyes quivered, eyes that burned, like green flames ablaze, yet somehow strangely cold.

Slowly, her eyes narrowed. Several seconds ticked by.

Victorique raised her head. A cold look of pure conviction was on her face.

“The Fountain of Wisdom has spoken to me. All the fragments have been reconstructed!”

She turned to the door of the study, and her face clouded over.

“But how do I prove it?”

Meanwhile, Kazuya was running all over the place—the square, the cemetery—in search of Victorique.

The things flashing through his mind made him anxious. The wolves chasing them yesterday. The eyeball in the jug. Someone hiding under the sheets in the next room to scare them. The horrific murder that happened just now.

Kazuya wandered around, asking the villagers if they had seen the girl with him, but to no avail.

As he breathed a sigh, he felt something pointy poking the back of his head. He turned around and saw what looked like the tip of a golden drill filling his vision. Fearing his eyes getting stabbed, Kazuya backed away.

“You there,” said a man’s voice, quivering with anger. “Kazuya Kujou, was it?”

“Inspector?!”

Inspector Grevil de Blois was standing there, carrying an oversized, square travel suitcase. His face was contorted, and his hands were trembling. He seemed furious.

“Huge luggage you got there,” Kazuya remarked.

“What...”

“Victorique’s luggage was also awfully big. Must be genetic.”

“What are you...”

Veins popped on the man’s forehead. “What are you doing here?! And where’s uhh... that long-haired, sassy, little...”

“Do you mean your sister?” Kazuya asked.

The inspector did not answer. He stamped his foot, breathing hard.

“She’s here, isn’t she?” he said finally.

“Yeah...”

“You would never come to this village alone.”

“Her mother apparently grew up here.”

The inspector shook his head and groaned. “Where is she?!”

“I’m actually looking for her as well.”

“How can you be so carefree?! As you know, she needs special permission to go out. That’s why she has hardly ever left the campus. Before she was admitted to the academy, she was locked inside a tower. If they find out that she came all the way here without permission, I’ll be in trouble!” He stamped his foot again.

“Trouble how? Why can’t Victorique go outside? I think anyone can take an occasional vacation, or go shopping on the weekends.”

The inspector ignored him.

Kazuya sighed. “I’m surprised you knew she’d be here.”

“Of course I know. She had never snuck out of the academy before. If she did, the only place she would go would be here.”

“...I see.”

While they were talking, Kazuya spotted a woman with red hair from afar. Before she could pass by, she gasped and whirled around.

“Oh, by the way, Inspector. The person who stole the Dresden plate at the bazaar came here with us for some reason. You know, the nun... a weird nun, though, I gotta say. She likes gambling, booze, and money.”

Curiously, the inspector again ignored him.

Kazuya studied the inspector’s face. *Something’s not right.*

Thinking back, the inspector was acting strange when Victorique solved the theft of the Dresden plate. When he found out who the culprit was, he left the library with a frown and did not arrest them. And now, it looked like Mildred was trying to run away the moment she spotted the inspector.

While Kazuya was deep in thought, the front door of the manor opened and Victorique stepped out. The inspector gasped. He placed his hands on Kazuya’s shoulders and shook him.

“Listen! Tell her to return to the academy immediately! Understood?!”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself?!”

Hearing the two arguing, Victorique raised her head, but she did not seem surprised. Kazuya pulled himself away from the inspector and rushed toward Victorique.

“Where on earth have you been?” he asked. “I’ve been looking all over the place for you.”

Kazuya was all worked up, but Victorique continued walking at a quick pace, lost in thought.

When he didn’t stop talking, she finally noticed him. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Don’t give me that. Your brother’s here, by the way.”

“Ah, Grevil. I was expecting him to show up soon.”

“Really? How did you know?”

She looked at him with genuine surprise on her face. “You didn’t notice?”

“Notice what?”

“That.”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind,” she groaned.

She walked away without another word, and Kazuya quickly followed.

“Anyway, you can’t just wander around all alone after such a horrific incident,” he said. “If you don’t want to go home, fine, but please don’t leave my side.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m worried about you!” he flared.

Victorique regarded his face curiously at first, but her expression gradually hardened. “I don’t have time for this right now.”

“Is that all you have to say? I’m just worried—”

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

Kazuya was taken aback.

“Leave me alone. Why are you so nosy? Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“What?!”

Kazuya’s face turned red with rage. His mouth flapped open and shut as he tried to argue back, when he heard someone calling them from afar.

They turned around to see Ambrose standing in front of the cathedral, beckoning them. They exchanged looks. After calling a temporary truce on their bickering, they headed for the cathedral.

Several teenage boys and girls had gathered in front of the cathedral. Ambrose looked exhausted, but he tried to be cheerful.

“Elder Sergius decided to continue the Midsummer Festival,” he said.

According to Ambrose, youngsters were gathered up at the cathedral during the evening of the Midsummer Festival to tell their future.

After the skit, in which the Summer Army emerged victorious, the cathedral would be left unoccupied in the evening. The ancestors then come to the square through the empty cathedral, and at night a ceremony would be held in which the ancestors were invited to witness the village’s bountiful harvest.

Before that, a ritual would be held, where the young ones were told their future in the form of questions to the spirits of their ancestors. Apparently, the village chief, Sergius, would speak on behalf of the spirits.

“Since you’re here, why don’t you two give it a go? Just get in line. I’ll be assisting Elder Sergius.”

Victorique didn’t want to bother, but Kazuya insisted, so they got in line.

It was humid inside the cathedral. It had a high ceiling that was narrower near the top, and even a whisper seemed to reverberate through the place. Stained glass glittered on the windows.

The interior was dark and somber. Thin rays of sunlight cast through small flower-shaped holes on the rose window fell on the floor. Glittering dust drifted in the air like snowflakes.

In the large hall were five rows of stone benches, sprinkled with pink, orange, and cream-colored flowers.

At the farthest end of the cathedral was a small chapel that looked like a tiny house with its pointy roof. It was dark and gloomy, with no flowers or sunlight to brighten it up.

A faint light came on inside the chapel. Tiny candle flames flickered in the dark. Next to the candle stand was an old vase, illuminated as if it was something precious. Kazuya realized that it was the same vase that the men dropped in the holy water.

As Kazuya's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw Sergius and Ambrose sitting inside the chapel. Sergius was wearing a toga reminiscent of a monk. A purple-colored sash hung down from his shoulder to the floor. Eyes closed, he gulped down water from a glass. Each time he emptied the glass, Ambrose would refill it.

The boys and girls took turns going inside the chapel and whispering something to Sergius. The village chief would then close his eyes and go quiet, as if in prayer, before whispering something back.

Sometimes his message was incredibly long, and sometimes they just spanned a few words. One by one, the youths left, some with satisfied smiles, others frightened and crying.

A serene and somewhat pious vibe filled the cathedral. If at first Kazuya was flippant about it, the look on the teenagers' faces made him serious.

The future, huh? What should I ask?

Kazuya's turn came.

Victorique gave him a shove. "You go first."

"What? Me? F-Fine..." Kazuya quietly stepped forward to Sergius.
"Let's see..."

Sergius closed his eyes. Kazuya's mind was busy thinking about what to ask.

Maybe I'll ask if I become someone that can help my country and the world.

“Well, I have this friend...” His lips moved on their own, and he started saying things that were not on his mind. And once he started talking, for some reason, he couldn’t stop. “She’s a girl. She’s smart, has a sharp tongue, and she’s such a handful. But I strongly believe that it’s not my fault. There’s just something wrong with her. She always makes fun of me, works me like a slave, and then treats me like a nuisance.”

“...That sounds terrible.”

“Yes. It’s just one headache after another, and it’s really pissing me off.”

“...I understand.”

“I’m just really, really mad.”

“Hmm...”

“So what I’m saying is...”

“...Go ahead.”

“I, uhh...”

Kazuya hesitated. He gathered the courage to speak what was on his mind.

“Will Victorique and I be able to stay together forever?”

His face turned red, and he suddenly felt very sad. He strongly regretted asking the question. Frustration, hope, and other inexplicable feelings filled his chest. He tried his best to ignore them. He thought that these feelings were unmanly.

The chapel was wrapped in silence. And darkness.

Something sparkled. It was dark inside the chapel, but a ray of sunlight came in from somewhere, falling on Sergius as he closed his eyes, glittering for a moment, before vanishing.

It seemed much darker now. Biting his lip, Kazuya waited.

“You will not die together,” Sergius murmured in a raspy voice.

Kazuya raised his head, and Sergius slowly opened his eyes. His pupils were gone; only two glassy balls of white remained on his face. He opened his mouth and let out a groan.

At first Kazuya couldn’t quite make out what he was saying, but eventually he picked up the words.

“Years from now... a gale strong enough to shake the world will blow.”

“Okay...”

“Your bodies are light. No matter how strong your feelings are, you are no match for the wind.”

“...”

“The gale will separate you.”

Kazuya felt his blood run cold.

“But worry not.”

“...”

“Your hearts will never be apart.”

“Our hearts?”

“Yes.”

The black of Sergius’ eyes returned. He drank directly from the jug, the water spilling from his mouth to his chin and down to his toga like a tiny waterfall.

“You may leave,” he said, then called for Victorique next. “Do not ask about your mother,” he said firmly.

Kazuya rushed out of the noisy cathedral.

It was much brighter outside. The sun was still up.

He almost tripped on the way out, but he managed to stay on his feet.

A thick, milky mist hung in the air. Kazuya stood there alone, no one in front or behind him.

Sergius’ voice echoed in his head.

Your hearts will never be apart.

The gale will separate you.

A gale strong enough to shake the world will blow.

Years from now...

The wind...

Kazuya shook his head wildly. “I’m not buying it. I will never believe in fortune-telling.”

He realized that his voice was trembling. It was unlike him, he thought. He wondered why he had asked such a question.

While staring at the tips of his shoes, he sensed someone coming from within the mist. They were approaching with silent footsteps. He spotted a small head with braided, golden hair. Bulging eyes darted to Kazuya.

It was Harminia.

“Um, I had my fortune told,” Kazuya said briefly.

“Ah.” Harminia nodded. Her voice was low, like a man’s, but then it suddenly took on a woman’s high-pitched tone. “I take it it was a terrible one?”

“Uh, yeah... I think.”

“Your future cannot be changed.”

“I don’t really believe in fortune-telling.”

“Cannot be changed,” she repeated with a chuckle.

While Kazuya stared at the maid blankly, Victorique came from behind.

Harminia eyed them both, and in a raspy old voice said, “There was, however, a time in the past when the future was changed.” She walked away, her figure quickly obscured by the thick veil of mist.

“What’s her deal?” Kazuya said. “Change this, can’t change that. Victorique... Wait, what’s wrong?”

Victorique’s cheeks were puffed like a squirrel whose mouth was stuffed with nuts. And tears filled her eyes.



Must've been a really awful fortune...

"What did you ask?" Kazuya asked as they walked toward the manor.

"It's none of your business," Victorique huffed. As usual, she was in a very bad mood.

"True," Kazuya replied, his temper flaring.

But when he realized that she could ask him the same question, he went quiet.

Maybe she asked a very serious question that she couldn't tell other people. In that case, I shouldn't ask her.

"I asked if I would grow," Victorique said brusquely.

"What do you mean, 'grow'?"

"Taller."

"What?!" Kazuya stopped and looked at her.

Victorique's small head only reached his chest, and he was rather small for a boy. She was quite short for a girl of fifteen. Apparently, her height bothered her.

Kazuya almost burst into laughter. "Oh, you asked about your height."

She must have been told that she wouldn't grow any taller, he thought. He felt sorry for her, but he couldn't help himself.

The anger and frustration inside him had vanished. Kazuya had never been one to dwell on things for very long. Except when he was really hurt, like when he clashed with his father and brothers.

But the quiet and dangerous look in Victorique's eyes allowed for no smiles.

"You laughed, didn't you?" she said.

"Huh?"

Victorique's expression dimmed. "It's always like this with you. You don't understand a thing about me, but you act like you do."

Kazuya was stunned. It wasn't like her to say those words. Her tone was darker than usual, and she sounded as though she was about to cry.

Suddenly, Victorique kicked his shin hard. It didn't pack much power, but her tiny leather shoe was so hard that Kazuya jumped.

"Ouch!"

Victorique stared daggers at him. She looked teary-eyed.

"Hey, that hurts," Kazuya protested. "I said it hurts. Stop it!"

Without a word, Victorique entered the manor ahead of him.

Before Kazuya could follow her inside, he was stopped by Inspector Blois, who had spotted him. Though concerned about Victorique, he remained behind.

“Kujou,” the inspector called. “Is she, um, heading back? I need her to stay in the academy, or I’ll get in trouble. You go convince her.”

“Uh, well...”

Kazuya explained that Victorique was adamant in staying and that he would be sticking with her.

The inspector snorted. “Does it really matter if you’re with her or not? You seem to get along well, but that’s just between you and her.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Inspector Blois narrowed his eyes. “She shouldn’t be outside. Cordelia Gallo did something she shouldn’t have done in the last Great War. She’s no ordinary human being. She’s dangerous. You just don’t know that yet.”

There was fear and disgust on the inspector’s face. Kazuya regarded him wordlessly. He wanted to ask something, but he didn’t know what to say. He felt as if he did not know anything about Victorique, and it made him sad and angry.

“Anyway, she has to return to the academy for the time being,” the inspector continued. “She was allowed admission on the condition that she stayed there. My father will decide the rest, I believe.”

“Your father? You mean Marquis de Blois?”

“That’s right! We will probably both get reprimanded. I was the one tasked with watching her.”

Kazuya shook his head. He couldn’t make sense of anything.

A figure was approaching them from the thick fog. Hearing the loud footsteps, Kazuya whirled around. A second later, the inspector did the same.

It was Ambrose. He was hurrying away from the cathedral, but stopped when he noticed them.

Emerging from the fog, he looked like a man from bygone times. His old-fashioned, stiff and fluffy woolen shirt, leather vest, knee-length trousers, and loud, pointy shoes gave him the appearance of a ghost of a peasant from the Middle Ages.

But his face—with its long, golden hair, green eyes, and rosy cheeks—was full of the youthful charm typical of young men who just left their teenage years. His expression was bright with curiosity.

He smiled at Kazuya. When he noticed the new guest, he said, “We’ve received word from the lookout. Are you... the... new...?”

He trailed off, his sparkling eyes staring straight at the drill that sat on top of Grevil’s pretentious face.

Traces of Ambrose’s childish nature came out, and he quickly forgot his position as the village head’s assistant. He studied the new guest curiously. And then like a child, started bombarding him with questions.

“If I may ask, sir, is that what’s currently popular among the youth? What is it supposed to represent? And your shirt is made of silk. Do men wear silk shirts too? What are those shiny things on your wrist? Ah, substitute for buttons. So pretty... Is it silver?”

“Ambrose!” A steely voice came from deep within the fog.

Ambrose snapped back to his senses and stopped talking. Inspector Blois didn’t seem to mind the young man’s questions. In fact, he was about to gladly explain to the young man his fashion choices, when an old man, who looked like a priest from the dark ages, appeared from the fog. Startled, he shut his mouth.

The inspector hid behind Kazuya. “Who’s that?” he whispered.

“The village chief.”

Trembling with rage, Sergius glowered at his young assistant. Even his beard seemed to stand on end. Ambrose bit his lip and hung his head low.

“Ambrose. You’re still interested in such things? As the next village chief, you will have to protect the village. I endorsed you because I believed you had the potential.”

“Sir...”

“You become restless when guests from the outside arrive. Just like when you were young. One day, a descendant named Brian Roscoe suddenly paid a visit, stayed in the village for a while, and used his vast wealth to install electricity in the village. You took to him, and all day long, you begged him to tell you stories about the city. Foolish curiosity. For months after Brian left, you climbed up the turret and looked out over the mountains. You are a grown man now. Have you not changed a bit from when you were a foolish child?”

“I apologize...” Ambrose hung his head even lower.

“And your hair is coming undone. Tie it up properly. Don’t let your hair erode your mind.”

Ambrose fumbled with his hair. It didn’t look that disheveled, but two strands of blonde hair hung loose around his neck.

For a while, Sergius stared at the young man as he tied his hair. He then turned his gaze to the odd, fashionable man hiding behind Kazuya.

“And who might you be?” the old man asked.

Ambrose told him that he was a new guest. Sergius’ brow furrowed slightly when Kazuya explained that he was Victorique’s half-brother.

Inspector Blois proudly introduced himself. “My name is Grevil de Blois. I’m a famed inspector by profession. Just kidding... Hmm? Is something the matter?”

As soon as he heard Inspector Blois’ occupation, Sergius’ expression changed. “Are you a police officer?”

“Yes... What of it?”

“In that case...” Sergius looked Inspector Blois straight in the eye. “There is an incident I would like you to solve.”

Dining room of the gray manor.

Marble mantelpiece. Glass lamps hanging in the four corners of the lustrous paneled wall. Paintings depicting scenes from the village.

The luxurious room was as stifling as ever. The low ceiling made Kazuya feel like he was being crushed little by little. He sighed and glanced at Inspector Blois, who was sitting beside him.

Sergius had practically forced them both to come inside. One after another, old people who seemed to be important figures in the village arrived and sat down. Kazuya and Inspector Blois shrank in their corner seats.

Harminia entered with silent footsteps, carrying old but well-polished silverware. She served tea, brandy, and wine.

Sergius was describing to Inspector Blois the incident that had occurred just a few hours earlier, in which a papier-mâché was replaced by a person and burned to death.

“In short, Alan was seen roaming elsewhere just before the incident, but he left after getting pelted by the hazelnuts thrown by the girls. Later, when Ambrose set fire to the float with the human-shaped papier-mâché, the

papier-mâché and Alan had somehow switched places. The man was engulfed in flames and died.”

“I see.” The inspector tapped his foot anxiously as he listened.

“You came at the right time. If the case remains unsolved, we’d have problems too.”

“Hey.” The inspector poked Kazuya in the knee.

“What?”

“Where is she?”

“If you mean your brilliant sister, she’s probably in her room.”

“Go call for her.”

Kazuya’s temper flared. “I know what you want. You’re going to use her and take credit for solving the case. Again. You should go ask her yourself. You never make any sense.”

Inspector Blois looked at Kazuya curiously. Slowly, his face contorted with frustration. “Never!” he snarled.

“Why?”

“There is a difference between you asking and me asking. The results are completely different. You don’t realize it yourself, Kujou, but the privilege you enjoy is so odd, it’s like getting free money from a loan shark.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just go get her! I’ll be counting on you from now on, Kujou.”

“Why, you...”

Despite his grumbling, Kazuya felt uneasy about leaving Victorique alone, so he quietly got up and left the dining room.

He walked along the low-ceilinged, lavish but suffocating hallway, climbed up the grand staircase with its bronze railings, and knocked on the door to Victorique’s room. The door opened immediately, and Victorique’s unhappy face peeked out.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I just wanted to check on you.”

“I’m fine. And I don’t care about you. Leave me alone.”

“What’s your deal?! Tsk. Fine. I’ll stop nagging you. By the way, your brother’s in the dining room, calling for help.”

“Help?” Victorique blinked.

"He's surrounded by villagers who want the Winter Man case solved, but he had this distant look in his eyes like he was absolutely clueless. He told me to come get you."

"Still the halfwit, I see."

"Unfortunately, he's your brother, not mine. What now?"

Victorique inclined her head in thought, then nodded. "Very well, then. Let's go." She stepped out of her room.

Kazuya glanced at the other rooms. "Where are the others?"

"Mildred seems to be in her room. Apparently, she's not too interested in the festival. The two men had been making a racket in one of their rooms earlier, but they seem to have gone outside. They were more resentful of the villagers than mournful of their friend's death. They think that the villagers killed him after disrespecting their custom."

Victorique started padding along the hallway, and Kazuya followed. Walking behind her, he stared at the fringes peeking out from under the hem of her hoop skirt. Her laced leather shoes were so small that they seemed like children's footwear. Victorique's petite figure was puffed up by the hoop skirt, laces, and velvet, bobbing with her every step.

When they returned to the dining room, everyone but Inspector Blois had risen from their chairs. The large windows were open, and the dark forest outside seemed to creep into the room. Black tangled branches and dense foliage allowed no light to penetrate through.

Sergius was holding a hunting rifle.

"What are you doing?" Kazuya asked, shocked.

"Wolves," the old man said curtly.

Kazuya followed Sergius's gaze deep in the woods, but saw nothing. When they arrived at the village, Sergius had reacted to a faint sound and fired into the forest, claiming there were wolves.

There was a sound of a branch snapping.

"I knew it!" Sergius fired into the forest before anyone could stop him. A gunshot rang out.

Victorique gasped. "No...!" she murmured. Gnashing her pearly little teeth, she rushed to the window, preventing Sergius from firing a second shot. "Stop!"

A groan drifted from the woods. Sergius lowered his rifle. "It's dead."

"No! That was a human voice!"

Sergius just stared at her, not grasping the meaning of her words.

“I heard those two talking about strolling in the woods!”

Victorique spun and bolted out of the room. Ambrose, who was in the hallway, looked at her in surprise.

Kazuya and the others followed her, out the front door and into the woods just outside the dining room window.

Victorique pushed her way through the black branches. Her dress caught on the twigs and was getting dirty quick. Kazuya stayed close behind her.

Bizarre-sounding moans came from outside the forest.

It sounded like a human stifling cries, or a beast grunting.

Not knowing where the sound was coming from, Kazuya looked up above. Thin black branches and overgrown leaves rustled ominously in the wind, blocking the sky.

Wolves...

Wild wolves lived in this forest...

“Victorique!” Kazuya gritted his teeth and went after her.

An eerie groan came from behind. Victorique stopped. The groans grew louder and higher.

“Victorique?” Kazuya called.

Victorique slowly turned around, frowning. “This is the second one,” she said.

“Second what?”

“Raoul has been killed.”

Kazuya scurried toward Victorique and looked at the direction she was pointing at.

Raoul was lying on the ground, bleeding from his chest. His eyes were wide open, staring blankly at an empty space. One look and it was clear that he was already gone.

The shrill cries came from Derek, who was running after Kazuya and Victorique from outside the forest. He stopped, and when he saw Raoul lying on the ground, his cries grew louder.

“We were taking a walk together,” the young man said. “Raoul went deeper into the woods. He thought it would be fun. Then I heard a gunshot, followed by Raoul’s voice. It sounded like a short yelp. I knew then that he was shot. But why? He’s dead! Why was he shot??”

“He was mistaken for a wolf,” Kazuya said.

Derek's mouth dropped open. "A wolf?"

Villagers arriving fell silent once they saw the gruesome scene.

"You saw the village chief firing into the forest yesterday, didn't you?

He heard a sound from deep in the woods, and thought it was wolves."

"Villagers don't venture into the forest," Ambrose added. "He didn't think it was a person."

"What are you talking about?! Can't you see he's dead?! He's been killed! I could have been shot. Do you understand that?!"

Derek's voice was piercing. The villagers silently glanced at each other.

Victorique picked up something from the ground. Noticing Kazuya's gaze, she let him see it, but he had no idea what it meant. Victorique's eyes narrowed, and she nodded.

A hazelnut was sitting on her hand.

"There's no hazelnut trees in this forest, Kujou," Victorique explained as they left the woods. "In short, it should not have been on the ground."

"So what does that mean?" Kazuya asked, trotting behind her.

"It was the hazelnut thrown at the late Alan."

"Okay..."

"By the way, where's Mildred?"

"H-How should I know?" Kazuya replied in surprise. "Probably in her room."

"Hmm..." Victorique yawned.

For a while, the village was in a state of confusion, but the villagers continued the festival nonetheless.

Ambrose spotted them. "Elder Sergius insists that he shot a wolf, not a man," he said with a sigh.

Victorique was silent for a while, staring curiously at Ambrose's face.

"What do *you* think?" she asked.

"Me?" Ambrose opened his mouth, but closed it again, as though afraid to answer. He was silent for a while, searching for the words, then like a broken dam, he went on. "I can't say. No one saw Mr. Raoul fall. But if I were in Elder Sergius' shoes, I would suspect that maybe I had killed him. No one saw a wolf. If I want to insist that I'm innocent, I need proof."

Staring at Victorique, he hesitated for a moment. "Whether you're guilty or innocent, proof is necessary."

His words seemed to be directed not only at Sergius, but Cordelia Gallo as well.

Victorique nodded. "Exactly."

There was an air of sympathy between them.

"By the way, Ambrose," she added. "You want the Midsummer Festival to go off without a hitch and eradicate the root of this evil, yes?"

"Of course."

"Chaos churns in the nameless village, and I hold all the fragments of its cause. If I can reconstruct the pieces, I can solve the mystery. Most of the time I toy with them to stave off boredom, and very rarely do I verbalize them in a way that others can understand. Why? Because it's tedious. It's like asking an adult to explain a very complex problem to a child. It's bothersome, so I seldom verbalize it. Only Kujou right here can convince me to do it every time."

"Really?" Kazuya said, a little surprised.

Victorique turned her face away, ignoring him.

"So you don't normally explain things, but you do if I ask? I see..."

"Shut up," Victorique growled.

Kazuya shut his mouth quick. "S-Sorry..."

"Um, what do you mean by that exactly?" Ambrose asked, puzzled.

"I know who the culprit is," Victorique answered.

"What?! What do you mean?! I thought it was Elder Sergius who shot Raoul."

"If I said you were wrong, what would you do?"

"But he fired his rifle back then..."

"He did, but how do you know that it was his bullet that hit Raoul?"

"I, uhh..." Ambrose went silent. His face took on a strange look. He was staring silently at the ground, wearing a blank and unreadable expression.

"Ambrose, would you like me to verbalize the reconstructed piece?"

"Uhh... I'm not sure I follow."

"She's asking if you want to know who the culprit is," Kazuya translated.

"I-I see... Yes, of course." Ambrose's voice was hard.

"Then lend me a hand."

"Lend a hand with that?"

“I will find who killed Alan and Raoul. In return, you will help me reconstruct the fragments of the chaos from twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years ago... Do you mean Elder Theodore’s murder?”

“Yes. The culprit is someone else. But to prove it, I need both your help.”

“Wait, both? Both who?” Kazuya asked curiously.

“Ambrose and you, Kujou.”

Kazuya and Ambrose exchanged glances.

Victorique’s eyes gleamed coldly, green flames blazing within. “I sometimes use the reconstruction of chaos in making deals. In exchange for my solving a mystery, I demand appropriate compensation.”

Kazuya remembered the first time he met Victorique. She had demanded that Kazuya bring her some rare food in exchange for the truth of the incident he was involved in. When he mentioned it, she chuckled.

“I would not count that as appropriate compensation,” she said. “I usually demand a greater and more painful sacrifice. A habit of mine since I was young. I tried to make my demands as devilish as possible. To stave off my boredom, of course.” She laughed, remembering something. She looked like she was having a lot of fun. “That is why Grevil despises asking me for help.”

“Ah, I get it now.” Kazuya nodded. He understood a little more about the siblings now. He recalled the conversation he had with Inspector Blois earlier. “Speaking of which, he mentioned something about a loan shark.”

“I believe he meant me.”

“He looked angry.”

Victorique gave a shrug.

Evening came.

The Midsummer Festival went on, and the time when the villagers’ ancestors were supposed to return through the cathedral was approaching.

One by one, the priests and young men on guard at the cathedral left and gathered in the plaza. After leaving the cathedral empty, they would wait for their ancestors’ return. Once they arrived, the final event would begin, where the villagers showed their bountiful harvest.

As the sky darkened, several large torches were erected in the square, illuminating the old cobblestones and the villagers dressed in medieval attire. The place seemed even brighter than during the daytime.

Victorique, Kazuya, Ambrose, and a few of the village youths, were hiding with bated breath in the cathedral, behind the petal-strewn benches.

The building was currently unoccupied. It was so quiet that they could even hear the crackling of the torches in the square. It was humid and much colder here. Sweet fragrance wafted from the scattered flower petals.

The cathedral, which was dark and somber even during the day, seemed even darker and colder. Pale moonlight spilled in through the rose window. Orange light from the torches in the square filtered through the stained glass, faintly illuminating the floor. Once their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, they were able to make out each others' faces.

Victorique gave a small sneeze. Kazuya almost sneezed too, but held it in.

“Why are we here?” Kazuya asked in a whisper.

“Because the culprit will come here,” Victorique replied.

“What do you mean?”

“There is always someone in the cathedral, and the only time it's empty is now, when the spirits of their ancestors pass through. The culprit will use this opportunity to steal.”

“Steal?”

“Steal what?” Ambrose asked. “There's nothing worth stealing in this village.”

“You might not know this,” Victorique said grimly, “but some things are valuable old. On the one hand, humans seek out new stimuli with insatiable desire. On the other, they're also odd creatures that value old and rare things. Things created in the past are different from those of today, and their numbers decrease over time. Thus, collectors are willing to pay any amount for them. Kujou, you remember the Dresden plate, don't you?”

Kazuya nodded. He recalled the plate on display at the bazaar. It was very old and looked like it would break at any moment, but there was something about it that fascinated him. When he asked Mildred about its price, the price shocked him. Mildred proudly declared that it was because of its age.

“For some people, this village is a treasure trove. There are many old and valuable items here that collectors would covet for any amount of coin. The old chest in the room, the cracked statue of Mary, and the old silverware for our meals. And... Ssh!”

The massive wooden doors of the cathedral opened silently, and someone slipped into the darkness. Their stealthy footsteps echoed faintly on the tiled floor.

Whoever it was tread softly, trying their best to not make a sound. Light from the torches in the square fell on the mysterious figure, casting a thin and long shadow on the floor that reached all the way to the stone ceiling. The shadow wavered as it came closer and closer.

As the figure passed by the bench where they were hiding, moonlight from the rose window illuminated their profile briefly. There was a thin smile on their waxen face.

Squinting, Kazuya saw the culprit’s face in the darkness.

“No way! Him?!”

“Do you remember what Mildred said about the vase being submerged in holy water?” Victorique asked.

Kazuya thought about it for a moment and nodded. Last night, Mildred ranted to them.

The men entered the cathedral and dropped an old precious vase into a large basin of holy water. When all three of them did the same thing, the villagers became furious. They said that they only value what’s new and can’t appreciate the real value of things.

Victorique shook her head. “It’s the opposite. Those three knew its value better than anyone else. That is why, when they first entered the village, they exclaimed as soon as they saw the cathedral’s ancient steeple and rose window. They all had this reverent look on their faces. That was how they actually felt. Captivated. All the subsequent boasting about their watches and radios and insulting the village as old-fashioned were nothing but lies. Alan, Raoul, and Derek, were the most knowledgeable about old things. They must have been thrilled about the Midsummer Festival.”

“Then why did they say all those things?!” Ambrose snapped.

Instead of answering, Victorique raised one hand and pointed to the shadowy figure.

“Because they were thieves.”

Kazuya and the others gasped.

The silhouette stepped into the chapel. They fumbled around in the darkness and lifted an old vase with both hands.

“They dropped the vase into holy water,” Victorique mumbled. “Not as a joke, of course. They meant to do that. They were looking for a real antique. They had come all the way here after reading the ad in the newspaper, expecting to find valuable antiques in the hidden settlement of the legendary Gray Wolves. The reason they dropped the vase in the water was to see if it would float or sink. If it was real, it would sink, but if it was a plated fake, it would float. The vase sank. It was the real deal.”

Victorique stood up. “The jig is up, Derek.”

The man gave a start. He was holding a vase with great care, breathing heavily. He stared at Victorique as she appeared from the darkness. His face was cold and blank, as though he were a completely different person from the one who wept over his friend’s death earlier today.

Derek broke into a run, heading straight for the door through the bench. Scattering flower petals, Kazuya leapt out of the bench and tackled Derek as he approached. The man was protecting the vase, so his movements were slow. He shot Kazuya a terrifying glare and attempted to escape once more. Kazuya grabbed his leg and pulled hard. Derek groaned as his head slammed into the cold stone-tiled floor.

Ambrose and the stunned youths jumped out a second later and pinned Derek down. Colorful petals danced in the air. Several people surrounded the man and held him down to prevent him from escaping. One of the young men ran out to call the villagers.

Derek hugged the vase close, as though he didn’t want anyone else having it.

“This is mine,” he said, sniffling. “Mine. I found it. I’m going to take it back to town... and ride away in my car. Not Alan... or Raoul. Me!” He looked like a spoiled child.

Looking down at him, Kazuya noticed something rolling off of Derek’s clothes. He crouched down and picked it up.

It was a hazelnut.

When he showed it to Victorique, she nodded. “Yes. It’s a hazelnut. Do you get it now?”

Kazuya shook his head “Nope. Not at all.”

Villagers were gathering in the old stone cathedral.

Petite but muscular youths were holding down Derek. The villagers stayed a short distance away, looking down at the man with glassy, creepy eyes.

The cathedral was cold and damp. Pale light from the moon shimmering in the twilit sky spilled from the rose window onto the stone floor.

Large torches still burned at the now-empty square, the crackling of their flames rolling all the way inside the building.

Footsteps sounded. The massive, wooden door opened.

Sergius appeared, accompanied by Ambrose. The village chief's footsteps echoed loudly on the tiled floor.

Inspector Blois, who had also appeared out of nowhere, strode toward Derek, acting like he caught the thief.

"I'll hear what you have to say back in town," he said. "You are under arrest. Get up."

"Wait a minute, Inspector," Sergius said in a raspy, but steely voice.

The inspector looked at the old man. His face was dyed orange from the small torch that Ambrose was holding. The flames flickered in his eyes.



“I need to hear his explanation.”

The inspector quickly stepped back and gestured something at Kazuya.

Kazuya gave the inspector a disapproving look, then turned to Victorique. She was crouched on the petal-strewn floor, holding the old bronze vase that Derek was trying to steal with both arms, studying it intently. She looked like a little cat playing with a new toy. Even Ambrose felt hesitant to disturb her. But he steeled himself.

“Um, Miss Victorique,” Ambrose called. “You said you’d solve the case.”

Victorique lifted her head and looked at Kazuya. “Kujou, you explain.”

Kazuya was silent, confused.

Victorique seemed surprised. “Kujou, you...”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. I’m a mediocre egghead. So you verbalize it.”

Finally, Victorique let go of the vase and rose to her feet.

She stepped into the middle of the circle and glanced around. The villagers flinched and took half a step back. Only three people weren’t intimidated by her: the village chief Sergius, his assistant Ambrose standing beside him, and the maid Harminia.

“Alan burning to death after switching places with the papier-mâché, and Raoul being mistaken for a wolf and shot were both Derek’s doing,” she began.

“How did he do it?” Ambrose asked. “Before the incident, we all saw Mr. Alan pass by the square and retreat when he got pelted by the hazelnuts. After the battle of the Summer Army and the Winter Army, I set fire to the papier-mâché myself. There was no time for any switching.”

“The papier-mâché was replaced with Alan long before that. In the morning, when the square was empty. Ambrose, you briefed us about the festival at dawn. After that, the square was deserted for a time. During that window, Derek knocked Alan out cold, wrapped him in a cloth, and switched him with the papier-mâché.”

“But—”

“It wasn’t Alan you spotted. We saw him from a distance. Alan and Derek have similar builds and all three of them dressed alike. Derek disguised himself with Alan’s signature beard, glasses, and hat to make it look like Alan was passing by.”

Derek looked up. “You have no proof.”

“Raoul is tall. It’s impossible for him to disguise himself as Alan. But Derek, you’re about the same size as him.”

“But...”

“One more thing.” Victorique showed what she was holding in her hand. A hazelnut.

Staring at Victorique, Derek looked puzzled, not sure what she was getting at, but then his pale face turned reddish-black with rage and then despair.

“Damn it... God damn it!”

“It fell from your body. If you weren’t disguised as Alan, where and how did the hazelnut get into your clothes?”

Derek did not answer.

Mildred, standing behind the villagers, jumped out, her crimson curly hair bobbing. She pinned Derek down and pulled the cuffs of his trousers.

Another hazelnut rolled out.

The damp and dark cathedral was wrapped in a chilling silence. Torchlight streaming through the stained glass windows cast a sinister orange glow on the faces of Victorique and the villagers.

Victorique broke the silence. “There was a hazelnut near Raoul’s body. That means you were there, Derek.”

Sergius raised his head and shook it, perplexed.

“In short, Derek lured Raoul into the woods beforehand and shot him. Because of the whips, drums, and blanks fired during the festival, no one cared about a shot fired in the distance. He then waited for the right timing when Sergius walked past or looked out the window to throw a stone into the woods to make a sound. Sergius assumed it was a wild wolf and fired into the forest. Derek then appeared and said that Raoul was in the woods and that he heard a scream.”

“So...” Sergius murmured. “The one who killed that man...”

“Wasn’t you.”

“Good heavens!” Sergius’ golden-bearded face contorted. He was silent for a moment, casting his gaze to the skies, and in a whisper that no one could hear said, “I never imagined I would be saved by Cordelia’s daughter.”

Victorique did not respond. She just stared at Sergius with clenched teeth, as though holding something back from bursting.

“But what’s his motive?” Ambrose asked gingerly. “You said they were thieves, but he didn’t steal. He killed.”

“Infighting, most likely.”

Derek lifted his head. A bizarre smile was plastered on his face. “That’s right.”

“Was it a dispute regarding how to split the proceeds?”

“Of course not!” Derek snorted. “We wouldn’t fight over something like that.”

“Why, then?”

“I know what things are worth. So I steal to take care of them. I’m not hard-pressed for cash. But all Alan and Raoul wanted was money. They’d been using my own money to steal, but they planned to betray me. One night, I heard them talking about stealing the vase and getting away in my car. I wasn’t planning to sell the vase. I wanted to keep it at my place. But they planned to sell it to a collector for a large sum, and I was in the way...”

Derek glared at the villagers’ dark faces. The torch in Ambrose’s hand crackled. Orange flames shone on Derek’s enraged face, giving him an eerie look.

“You’re all just as guilty,” he snarled. “Prehistoric fools. You have no idea how much treasure is in this village. Hey, that maid over there. How could you use such wonderful medieval silverware for your meals? Same with you priests. I can’t believe you would leave a vase like that out in the open. The vase, the utensils, everything would be much happier if they were carefully kept by people who knew their true value!”

“I believe things are happy when they are used,” Ambrose said.

“What do you know?!” Derek snapped, then hung his head, sobbing.

The villagers’ thick silence pervaded the cathedral. The air became more humid, caressing the cheeks of everyone present, and the moon grew brighter, its light casting the rose window’s pattern on the floor.

“Take him away!” Sergius ordered. “I will decide what to do with him.”

Inspector Blois protested, but Sergius cut him off. “We have laws in this village. You will obey them while you’re here.”

“This village is within the Kingdom of Sauville. You must obey Sauville’s laws and its police.”

“This village is within Sauville, you say?”

Sergius threw his head back and guffawed. His laughter rose to the ceiling, the sparkling stained glass, and up the starry night sky. His glassy, green eyes took in Inspector Blois.

Inspector Blois backed away, as if fearing something invisible. There was something else there besides Sergius’ petite figure, something he couldn’t see. It was the very thing that the residents of the town at the foot of the mountain feared.

“This is not a village,” Sergius mumbled with a laugh.

“What?”

“You think this is Sauville? You know nothing, dear guest.”

The villagers had all left the cathedral, leaving only Sergius and Inspector Blois. Moonlight pouring down from the ceiling made the inspector’s face look even paler than usual. Petals scattered on the stone floor had wilted, as if something nonhuman—Gray Wolves—had sucked the life out of them.

Sergius continued laughing.

Doubt crossed Inspector Blois’s face as he stared at him. He thought the old man was crazy.

Sergius, on the other hand, looked delighted.

“This is the Kingdom of Saillune,” he muttered softly. “I am not the village chief. I’m the king. We are of different races to begin with. Do you understand?”

The torches in the square were ablaze, their flames crackling into the night sky. Villagers bustled about—donning their costumes, shouting at each other—so they could resume the Midsummer Festival.

“What was the final event again?” Mildred asked as she approached with loud footsteps, her red hair bouncing.

Kazuya and Victorique exchanged glances.

“Uh... If I recall correctly,” Kazuya said, “they will show their abundant harvest to the spirits of their ancestors...”

Hearing their conversation, Harminia came closer, and in a low, rumbling voice added, “Our ancestors speak in the language of the afterlife. A language incomprehensible to us. We cannot hide anything from the spirits of the dead.”

“R-Right. Ambrose was excited to play the role of the ancestor. He made that black mask, and all.”

Together with the papier-mâché of the Winter Man.

Kazuya recalled the time when Ambrose asked him about the custom in his country, where the spirits of their ancestors returned for one day during summer.

When he left his home, he quietly closed the door to his heart, and he'd been standing still in front of it ever since. He had always been careful not to open it, lest he felt sad. But as he participated in the Midsummer Festival celebration in this mysterious medieval village, the lock to the door loosened little by little, and now, suddenly, it opened. Kazuya swallowed and closed his eyes.

Wistful memories came flooding back.

Cicadas buzzed.

Blending in with their chitters were the soft chirping of the *higurashi*—evening cicadas.

The summer sun shone bright on the hand fan that a family member left on the porch. He could hear the soothing sound of water drifting in from somewhere. His mother raised her kimono a little, and with a smile, sprinkled water on the dry garden.

As he lay on the dark tatami room, staring blankly at the dazzling garden, his mother's silhouette moved closer to the porch with soft footsteps and an equally soft laughter. The glaring sun prevented him from seeing his beloved mother's face clearly.

“Kazuya. Hurry up and change or your father will scold you.”

The young Kazuya quickly got up. The sliding door flung open, and his father, dressed in a *haori* and *hakama*, stepped in. His two brothers followed behind, also dressed in formal attires. They looked like triplets. They were large, with broad shoulders and robust chests, and always filled with confidence.

His father looked down at Kazuya, who was sitting dazed on the tatami mats. “What are you dawdling around for, Kazuya?” he asked with surprise. “Get changed, quick!” He turned to his mother. “You’re not supervising him enough.”

His mother, standing on the concrete floor of the porch, replied with soft smile, "My apologies."

Kazuya shrank, knowing that his mother was scolded because of him.

He hurried out of the room to get dressed, and passed by his sister in the dark hallway. She was holding a bouquet of chrysanthemums. She looked lovely in her kimono.

"Pretty, right?" she said. Captivated by the fine silk kimono, Kazuya muttered some words of praise.

"You're a good boy," she said with a smile.

Hearing his father's booming voice from inside, Kazuya quickly went to get changed.

It was the day of their ancestors' return. Later, Kazuya's whole family went to the cemetery for a visit.

It was hot outside.

Cicadas buzzed, while the higurashi chirped softly.

With his father leading them, they walked along the path to the temple. His older brothers walked behind his father, and the young Kazuya, with his mother on his right and his older sister on his left, tried his best to keep up with the grownups.

The men's back were huge.

The grass along the roadside and the leaves on the trees glowed bright green under the sun. Summer in his country was beautiful. It was Kazuya's favorite season.

A hot wind blew past, and his mother's white parasol spun.

The gust tousled his sister's glossy black hair, blocking his vision. Startled, Kazuya fell on the stone steps and yelped. His mother and sister helped him up, giggling. They smelled sweet—a woman's scent, full of tender affection that wrapped you in its embrace, a scent that his father and brothers somehow lacked.

When they arrived at the temple, his father spoke in front of the grave about how his male ancestors had been great generals and statesmen. As he rumbled on, his mother's fair and slender arms took the bouquet of chrysanthemums from his sister and placed it before the grave. She then took a ladle of water and poured it over the gravestone. It was always his mother's slender arms that sprinkled the water. Just watching the water flow overwhelmed him with emotions.

His father continued on, while his brothers listened proudly. Their ancestors were fine men, and so was their father. His brothers would follow their example too, in the near future. Kazuya tried to listen to his father's words, but they were too difficult for the young Kazuya to understand.

In that moment, a summer butterfly approached Kazuya. It was a radiant, golden color, with translucent wings. When he reached for it, it flew away, but then stopped a short distance from him, as if inviting him to join it. Gold was Kazuya's favorite color. Eventually, the little butterfly fluttered away. Kazuya never told anyone about the golden butterfly, and how it never left his mind.

Cicadas cried in the distance.

Summer in his country was beautiful.

Kazuya opened his eyes.

He was standing vacantly in the square of the nameless village, his eyes wide open. No one around him noticed his momentary trip down memory lane.

Only a few years passed since then, but it seemed like a distant memory. He wondered if it was because of the sheer distance, being across the ocean.

He glanced to his side and saw Victorique—his little golden butterfly, now—watching the hustle and bustle of the square with wide-open eyes. Mildred, standing next to her, was also quiet, her eyes distant, as if remembering something. No one spoke. It was a moment of quietude.

Watching the hubbub, they were all silent, lost in their own thoughts.

Suddenly, Victorique reached for Mildred's crimson, cotton-candy hair, and gave it a tug.

"Ouch! Wh-What are you doing?!"

"So, Mildred."

"Wh-What is it?"

"How do you know Grevil?"

Mildred's fair, freckled cheeks instantly turned pale. "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you work for him? Or are you a friend?"

Mildred sighed in resignation. Kazuya's gaze darted back and forth between them, wondering what Victorique was talking about.

“How long have you known?” Mildred asked.

“Since the moment you boarded the train.”

“You knew right from the start?!”

“What are you two talking about?” Kazuya cut in.

Victorique grumbled for a bit, but eventually gave in. “Kujou, did you really not notice?”

“Notice what?”

“Mildred works for Grevil.”

“What?!”

“You’re unbelievable... Listen, Mildred here stole the Dresden plate—”

Mildred gave a grunt. “You know about that too?”

“Of course. But Grevil turned a blind eye. Why? Because they were working together in some capacity. When I snuck out of the academy, she somehow found out and followed me everywhere. Even when she was hungover, she joined us in the rocking carriage. And she was calling someone. There was someone she had to report to.”

“In short...?”

“Grevil asked her to keep an eye on me. That’s why he didn’t arrest her for stealing the plate.”

“I screwed up while playing poker,” Mildred said wearily. “I approached him at a bar in the village. He’s a nobleman, wears expensive clothes. And he looked dumb. I thought he was an easy target, but a card I use for cheating fell out of my sleeve in the middle of a game. He had lost a lot at that point, so he was adamant about arresting me. I then agreed to do the job you just mentioned. Since then, he’s been working me like a slave. It’s a real pain in the neck, I tell ya.”

“It’s your fault for cheating,” Kazuya remarked.

“I wanted money, okay?!” She stamped the ground, and her large breasts jiggled. She was oozing sexual charm that seemed to drip to the ground like sweet honey. “I love money!”

Kazuya was taken aback. *Why does she only look sexy when talking about money?* he wondered, puzzled.

“I came from a poor family,” she said in a pitiful voice. “We had a hard time. I cried tears of bitterness as I bit down on potato roots.” She took out a cotton handkerchief and made a gesture of wiping nonexistent tears. “My

dad was a drunk Irish immigrant, and my mom was a... uhh... can't think of anything... but anyway..."

"You can stop making stories now. And your fake tears are not fooling anyone."

"Hush! Anyway, I can't help but drool when I see money. I love money so much, it keeps me up at night! I had no idea this village was a treasure trove, though."

"Don't you dare steal anything. Or Elder Sergius will judge you."

"I'm poor," she said biting her lip. "Who cares if I steal?!"

"I do!"

They glared at each other for a while. When Kazuya showed no sign of backing down, Mildred eventually gave up.

"Talk about a stick-in-the-mud."

Kazuya looked dejected at having one of his flaws pointed out.

Then, Mildred's mood somehow brightened. "Fine. I'll return the plate to the church. I stole it because it was expensive, but I couldn't figure out where to sell it. I wrapped it in a cloth and hid it under my bed. Can you get off my back now?"

"...If you return it, sure."

"You want hush money, right?"

"Not really."

"Oh, stop being such a tight-ass. You're such a bore."

"Wh-What did you say?!"

Suddenly, Kazuya remembered the colorful items she was selling at the bazaar. A shiny ring, laced collar, postcards. He and his classmate Avril checked them all out before choosing the turban.

"Uhm, in that case, I'd like one of the items you were selling."

"Hmm? Which one? No expensive stuff, by the way. You don't like money, so you don't deserve expensive things."

"What kind of a twisted logic is that?!"

Kazuya sighed. He then brought his mouth to Mildred's ear and whispered something. A bizarre expression appeared on her freckled face.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" she asked, staring at Kazuya.

"Yes!"

"You're a tight-ass, but you're also weird."

Kazuya blushed.

“You’re okay in my book. I like you way better than that pretentious fop.”

Mildred gave a hearty laugh, her crimson hair bouncing.

Ambrose, carrying a torch, came running as soon as he spotted them. After hesitating for a bit, he handed the torch to Harminia, who was standing beside him.

The flame crackled, creating orange sparks.

“The ritual to welcome the spirits of our ancestors is about to begin,” Ambrose said.

“Right!” Kazuya nodded.

Victorique stirred. Kazuya and Ambrose exchanged glances. The young man’s face was a little stiff from nervousness.

A night breeze blew.

Crackle. Crackle.

The torch in Harminia’s dry, pale hands flared higher, the flame swaying from side to side.

The festival was reaching its climax.

Monologue 5

Every night, memories of blood come flooding back to me.

It happened a long time ago, but night after night, I remember the colors, the sounds, the feel, so vividly.

The dagger, with its brass ornaments, buried up to the hilt.

The setting sun burning like flame outside the glazed window.

The blue velvet curtains rustling faintly in the wind.

The blade gleaming reddish black, protruding from the chest of a man who toppled without so much as a shriek.

How after he drew his last breath, there was an otherworldly silence, a silence so deep and profound.

How I stood there until the sun had sunk completely and darkness blanketed the room.

I remember coming to my senses and returning to my original spot, swallowing the joy slowly welling up inside me.

It was as if it all happened just a few moments ago.

I can't forget.

Are you trapped?

People call us Gray Wolves. But they are wrong.

Wolves do not kill their own kind. Especially not for a reason like that.

I stood still with a torch in my hand.

The Midsummer Festival was finally coming to an end. I smiled all the while as the unexpected guests killed each other, as the mystery of their murders was unraveled and the foolish culprit was apprehended.

A fool must not commit murder, lest they be caught immediately and judged.

I will never be judged.

I touched my face with my free hand. With the tip of my forefinger, I pulled at my lower eyelid, and scratched my eyeball.

Whenever I felt nervous or angry, my eyes itched. Itched so much. It was the same back then. While I hid in that spot and held my breath, my eyes itched so much that I almost screamed out, but I bore with it. It would be over in a moment, I had thought.

Back then...

Yes, my mind always cast back to that moment—to the night of the murder.

Are you trapped?

In the distance, our ancestors paraded by, torches in their hands, their feet crunching on the gravel. Drums, whips, and fired blanks echoed endlessly in the square in joyous welcome to the spirits of the dead. Whips cracked. Drums rumbled in the chilly air.

The dark night sky seemed to loom closer. I was beginning to feel like I was on stage, and not under starry skies, a feeling I had whenever the festival was entering its climax. Drums reverberated through the night.

The parade of our ancestors was nearing the square. They were dressed in sickening colors of red and black and donned creepy tunics, dancing merrily. Residents of the afterlife looked different from those of the living. Their clothes, their movements, their shrill cries—it was hard to believe that they were once human beings just like us. But we must welcome them, our ancestors, to the Midsummer Festival, and give them a joyous send-off.

They were coming.

In the lead was a man wearing a black mask.

While the other men behind him danced merrily, stamping their feet, jumping up and down, the man in the black mask moved awkwardly. His arms jerked in a strange motion, as though he had not moved his limbs for a long time, his legs jolting forward. Tottering, he led the procession, even when it looked like he would tumble at any moment.

Ambrose had crafted quite the nice mask. The young man must be pleased to be parading around wearing a mask he made himself. He was chosen to play this major role as a reward for his accomplishments as the village chief's assistant. He must be very proud.

Our ancestors finally stepped into the square.

Greeted by cheers and fired blanks, they paraded around in a most amusing manner. The villagers, eager to show their bountiful harvest, joined

the dancing procession, with ripe vegetables, barrels of wine, and lustrous fabrics in hand.

I did not dance with them. I simply stood in a corner of the square and watched.

No one knew that I had committed murder.

Laughter spilled from my lips. It was all too amusing.

The clamor of the festival filled the square. Some villagers were dancing with vegetables in their hands, some with brightly-colored textiles, and some with barrels of wine. Shouts, drums, and the cracking of whips echoed through the air, drowning out my laughter. No one heard me.

Suddenly, the man with the black mask stopped.

I was the only one who noticed.

I swallowed my laughter. For some reason, alarms started ringing in my head. "Run," said a whisper. I stood there, frozen. My heart pounded in my chest.

A knot formed in my gut.

The masked man stood slouched for a moment.

Then he started advancing in quick, awkward motions.

He raised his head.

Run!

An alarm sounded again. But it was too late. My eyes met with the masked man's. I could no longer move.

My eyes had locked with the mask's huge, vacant, uneven eyes.

The masked man mumbled something. The words did not reach my ears; I could not make them out. But I could clearly hear the voice inside of me.

It's too late. It has found you, Harminia!

Slowly the square grew quieter and darker.

An eerie silence filled the square now. The night sky suddenly became distant, and the stars began to twinkle.

I stood there with a torch in my hand. The masked man was mumbling something. The villagers gathered in the square looked at me and the masked man with bated breath. The flame of the torch crackled.

The masked man's voice grew louder and louder. But despite his loud voice, I couldn't make out the words.

I realized then that it was the voice of the dead. He was speaking in a language that was not of this world. The unfamiliar, otherworldly inflection

reverberated in the air. Every trot forward, his voice grew louder and louder, the twisted, expressionless black mask bobbing from side to side.

I looked around and spotted Ambrose watching me curiously. I found it odd. If Ambrose was there, then it wasn't him behind the mask. Who was it, then?

My vision went black for a split-second, and then it came to me.

I realized who the dead man was.

I heard a whisper in the back of my mind.

That's right. It's the man you killed, Harminia!

My legs trembled.

Gradually, slowly, I was able to discern the masked man's words. He was right in front of me now. I shrank back and yelled.

"I found you," he said. "I found my killer."

I shrieked. His voice sounded bizarre, like the growling of a beast.

I took a step back.

"Harminia."

"Elder Theodore," I called in a shaky voice.

"You killed me." His voice quivered with rage. "You killed a distinguished man with your young hands. How could you live such a carefree life in the past twenty years? Foolish child!"

I backed away further. "No! It wasn't me!"

"Gold coins fell."

My breath seized.

The man giggled under his mask. "Gold coins fell to the floor. I remember it well, Harminia. The glittering gold coins that spilled from the grandfather clock. I remember. It was my last memory, after all. Harminia, the young murderer..."

"G-Gold coins?!"

Only the dead would know that. The dead and me. No one else. The gold coins scattered on the floor...

"Elder Theodore!" I cried out. "No! Please, go back to the afterlife!"

"Do you confess to your crime, Harminia?"

"I do. I confess." I waved the torch around. Sparks from the flame danced in the air and fell on me like orange dust. "I killed you!"

The square was silent.

The big torch in the middle sputtered. A chilly wind blew, pushing the milky mist softly between me and the dead.

The villagers and guests stared at me in shock. Fear and loathing seeped into glassy, green eyes. They backed away a little.

“I didn’t have a choice,” I groaned.

Right? I thought. The voice inside me was gone now. I was alone.

“I was only a child!” I screamed in fear.

“So you killed him.”

Suddenly, the voice behind the mask took on a normal inflection.

“You really *did* kill him. You were right, Victorique.”

A little girl appeared from behind the large torch. Cordelia’s daughter. Her clear, green eyes regarded me.

Puzzled, I strode toward the masked man and ripped his mask off.

It was one of the guests—the oriental boy. He was wearing an apologetic look.

There was nothing frightening about him. He was thin and of small build. He was just a normal boy, good-natured but with a somewhat stubborn look to his face. Not one to be feared.

He looked sorry, but he showed no sign of backing down.

“I put on an act so we could hear it from you,” he said meekly.

“So you—”

“Victorique said it was you who killed Theodore.”

I glanced back at Cordelia’s daughter.

Our eyes met. She was staring back at me.

There was quiet determination in her eyes that said she was unshakable.

I stood frozen.

I felt a burning itch in my eyeballs, as though someone poured oil over them and set them on fire.

Chapter 6: The Golden Butterfly

Kazuya removed his mask and hid behind Victorique, turning red with embarrassment. The villagers gathered in the square, holding barrels of wine and colored textiles, watched him with puzzled looks.

Dancing and acting is too embarrassing.

Kazuya was reluctant to move, so Ambrose approached him. “About the unfamiliar words you muttered...”

“It’s the language of my country,” Kazuya said. “I have no idea what the language of the afterlife is like, so I used my own language instead. I thought that if people don’t recognize it, it should provide the same effect.”

“How many vowels does it have? Do you write from the right? What, you write vertically?! What about—”

Kazuya eventually managed to interrupt him and called Victorique. “Can you please explain what Harminia did?”

Victorique nodded. There was an odd look on her face as she looked down at Harminia.

“Pigeons flew,” she said.

“...Pigeons?”

“While I was in the study where the incident took place twenty years ago, thinking, Harminia walked in. We had a conversation. After a while, she left, and I continued racking my brain. Then, white pigeons took off outside the window.”

“Okay...”

“When I saw them, the Wellspring of Wisdom spoke to me.” Victorique looked at Kazuya with a strange smile. “This chaos shares the same structure as the Dresden plate theft at the bazaar. Mildred released a pigeon from under her skirt, drawing everyone’s attention away, and stole the plate. Something that moved was necessary to restrict the people’s line of sight.”

“That sounds about right... So what about it?”

“The pigeon became gold coins. That’s all. Very simple, really.”

They entered the gray manor and gathered in the study where the tragedy took place twenty years ago.

“At the time of the incident,” Victorique began, “Harminia was only a six-year-old child. One of the things she told me about the incident was: it would have been difficult for Cordelia, a girl in her mid-teens, to stab a grown man in the upper back. Why did she say that? Because she wanted to imply that it would’ve been practically impossible for a child to commit the crime.”

“But Harmina was, in fact, a mere child back then,” Sergius said.

“With the right method, it’s possible for her to have committed the crime.”

“No, it’s impossible,” the old man insisted, then turned to leave the study.

“Elder Sergius,” Ambrose said. “Please, just listen to what she has to say.”

Sergius shot him a glare. “Foolish young man. You dare reprove me?”

“He’s right,” Victorique said. “Stay. You only have to listen. Nothing else.”

Sergius whirled back around furiously. But he did not leave.

An ominous silence drifted into the study. Polished medieval weapons gleamed on the wall shelves. The desk and bookshelf were white with dust.

“There are several curious points to this incident,” Victorique continued. “First: Theodore was found dead in his locked study. Second: the gold coins scattered on the floor. Third: the murder weapon, a dagger, had pierced all the way through his body from the upper back. Lastly: the time.”

Victorique looked into Sergius’ grim face. “Sergius, you said you glanced at your pocket watch, and it was exactly twelve o’clock. Cordelia was also always right on time.”

“That is correct.”

“But the people you were with offered varied testimonies about the time.”

“Indeed. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Why did the people in the manor that night have mixed perceptions about the time?”

Victorique eyed everyone present. Restrained by the young villagers, Harminia quirked her lips up a little.

Victorique pointed to the wall. “Because the grandfather clock did not chime that night.”

A large grandfather clock stood there. The numbers on the old, ornate dial had faded, but the pendulum still moved rhythmically.

Click. Click. Click.

“That’s right!” Sergius exclaimed.

“The grandfather clock did not sound that night. So only Sergius, who checked the time on his pocket watch, thought it was exactly twelve o’clock when the incident happened, while the rest had varied statements. Now why didn’t grandfather clock chime?”

All eyes were on Victorique’s small face.

“Because Harminia was hiding inside it.”

“What?” Sergius scoffed.

Victorique ignored him and went on. “Harminia snuck into the study before Theodore entered. She then climbed up onto the grandfather clock and hid inside the pendulum compartment, which isn’t impossible for a small child. There she waited quietly for Theodore to come. The clock did not chime while she was inside. When Theodore entered the study later, she used the gold coins next.”

“What do you mean?” Sergius’ face gradually became blank, his cheeks turning pale.

“She was hiding in the clock, yes, but how would she kill Theodore? Do you think a mere child could stab a grown man to death? Impossible. But there *is* a way. You don’t rely on your strength, but instead on your full body weight and gravity. The young Harminia did not stab Theodore while standing. She jumped down from up the grandfather clock where she was hiding, weapon and all.”

The room was wrapped in an eerie silence. Everyone swallowed. No one spoke.

Victorique watched Harminia as she glanced up at the grandfather clock and fell silent. The maid chuckled.

“The gold coins were not on the floor initially. Harminia had them. And she scattered them on the floor. The glittering coins fell from the grandfather clock, tracing golden threads in the air, like a golden meteor

shower. When they reached Theodore's upper field of vision, he would have immediately followed them with his eyes. Even if he failed to notice them then, the noise as they hit the floor would have drawn his attention. Theodore walked toward the coins and stopped right in front of the grandfather clock, the perfect spot for Harminia to jump to. She used moving objects to restrict the victim's line of sight, limiting his movements. Harminia then jumped off the clock onto Theodore while he was looking down at the floor. Her weight pushed the dagger deep into its hilt. Theodore collapsed to the floor with the gold coins, and passed away silently. That explains two of the curious points: the scattered gold coins and the dagger lodged in the victim's upper back. After killing Theodore, Harminia locked the door and hid inside the grandfather clock once more. She then waited patiently until someone discovered the body. That's why the study appeared to be empty."

Victorique's voice began to tremble. "And then Cordelia came in. She noticed the body and ran away screaming. Harminia then escaped through the open door. A wild guess afterwards led to the conclusion that Cordelia was the culprit. Now then, Sergius."

Sergius jerked. His face looked as if he had aged years in just a day, perhaps from fatigue. But his eyes were filled with the sharp light of a stubborn old man who would never admit fault.

"This is your responsibility, Sergius. How will you apologize to Cordelia for banishing her for a crime she did not commit?"

There was a long silence.

Sergius pointed at Harminia, glaring at her with a mixture of fury and contempt. "I will use all my power as head of this village to punish this woman," he said in a strained voice.

"No!" Harminia cried. "I don't want to get banished! I don't want to go outside the village!"

"Cordelia made it safely down the mountain," Ambrose said, restraining the maid. "Brian Roscoe's out there, too. If you look for him and ask for help, I'm sure—"

"I hate Cordelia! I hate Brian Roscoe! I want to stay!"

"But it's great out there," Ambrose mumbled, then quickly shut his mouth.

Victorique approached the wailing maid. “Why did you do it? What would drive a six-year-old child to kill a well-respected village chief?”

“Take a guess,” Harminia said in a low voice.

“Because of the future?”

Harminia’s eyes bulged. “How do you know that!?”

“The only connection I can think of between a child and the village chief is the divination during the Midsummer Festival. Some children may resent the village chief for telling them an unfavorable future.”

Kazuya thought back to when Victorique looked dejected. She said she was told she would never grow taller. Back then, he ran into Harminia at the cathedral’s exit, and she mumbled some cryptic words.

“Your future cannot be changed.”

“There was, however, a time in the past when the future was changed.”

What did she mean by that? Kazuya wondered.

“It’s just fortune-telling,” Victorique said. “You didn’t have to take it seriously. But you had strong faith in the laws of the village and the words of the village chief. You could not doubt the divination.”

“That’s right... I had to believe in it. But that doesn’t mean I would accept it!” Her voice dropped to a murmur. “I asked a question I shouldn’t have asked. A terrifying one, out of childish curiosity.”

“What was it?”

“My death.”

“...I see.”

Harminia regarded everyone with tearful eyes. “I was told that twenty years later, when I turned twenty-six years old, I would die. Twenty-six years old? I wanted to live longer. Way longer than that. To change the future, I had to kill Elder Theodore.”

“That’s it!?” Sergius snapped. “You killed our great leader for such a reason?! You wretched child!”

“You would never understand what I felt! The hopelessness, the anger, the sadness!”

They glared at each other. Harminia’s eyes were bulging; it looked like they would pop out of her head at any moment. Sergius’ eyes, on the other hand, were bloodshot, and his fists were shaking with fury.

Sergius' face took on a zealous fanatic's expression. Eyes crossed, he pointed at Harminia with a quivering finger.

"Ambrose, cut this woman's head off!" he roared in a voice that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth.

"...What?" Ambrose's mouth dropped open.

"It's village custom to behead criminals. It has become obsolete since there are no more villagers who commit grave crimes, but when I was your age, I used to be in charge of beheading criminals."

Inspector Blois, who had been listening in the back, stepped forward. "Mr. Sergius. As I said before, I'll be taking Derek with me to the station. And the statute of limitations has run out on this girl's murder case. If you behead her, this young man will be charged with murder by the Sauville Police. And if the villagers give their tacit approval, they will be charged with aiding and abetting."

"This is not Sauville!"

"You can't just make up a country name and expect me to believe you."

"Get out!"

Following Sergius' order, the young men carried Inspector Blois into the hallway. His screams faded in the distance.

"Kujou, do something!" he yelled.

"Cordelia was only banished because her crime was never fully proven," Sergius said in a voice that seemed to make the walls vibrate. "Harminia, you will be beheaded, your head and body buried separately. You will not return on the eve of the Midsummer Festival. No criminal will appear before their descendants. That's the law. Ambrose!"

"E-Elder Sergius..."

Ambrose was trembling. His beautiful, feminine face was pale as wax.

Sergius took a large axe from the display shelf and threw it at him. Ambrose caught it absently, then tossed it to the side with a shriek. Fine, white dust rose as the axe fell on the floor.

Sergius' glowered at his young assistant with red, bulging eyes. "Do it. If you're going to be the future village chief, you must never overlook criminals!"

"But she committed the crime when she was only a child. That was twenty years ago. And..."

"Ambrose!"

“Sh-She used to play with me a lot when I was a kid. She was difficult to approach, but she was kind. She killed Elder Theodore, but she was nice to me. I won’t do it.”

“We have laws. Harminia will die at twenty-six, just as Elder Theodore foretold.”

Ambrose couldn’t oppose the old man. Slowly he grabbed the axe, his arms shaking. His teeth clattered from terror. Tears welled up in his large, clear eyes and rolled down his pale cheeks like petals. His shoulders shook violently.

He turned to Kazuya with a pleading look. Kazuya himself was trembling.

“Dear guest,” Ambrose said. “In the outside world, what do you do in this situation?”

“The police will arrest the culprit,” Kazuya replied in a shaky voice. “They will conduct an investigation, and... Victorique.”

“A trial will be held,” Victorique said.

“A tri...al?”

“Yes. There will be two parties, the prosecution and the defendant Harminia, with each side making their argument. A verdict will then be handed down. Depending on the crime, the defendant may be sentenced to death, incarcerated, or released. There is no death penalty for crimes committed by children.”

Ambrose lowered the axe. He looked heartbroken. But Kazuya saw strong determination in the young man. Lips pursed, he lifted his head forlornly.

The young assistant regarded the enraged village chief. “I have always respected you, Elder Sergius,” he said, his voice quivering. “And I love this village. It’s the village where I was born. You acknowledged me, a young man with no name. But this village is not the whole world. So, um... Harminia, run!”

Ambrose suddenly pushed the youths restraining Harminia. Amid cries of surprise and protests, Harminia moved as if she were a different creature. She leapt and grabbed the spear from the display shelf.

Harminia turned around, eyes bulging. Her pale lips parted, and she mumbled something.

She then spun and took off at full speed.

Ambrose stood still for a while, stunned at what he had done. A group of petite, glassy-eyed youths surrounded the young assistant and berated him. He looked like Snow White surrounded by seven dwarfs. A moment later the youths dashed out into the hallway, leaving Ambrose, their leader, behind. One after another, they called Harminia's name.

Sergius cursed and raised a quivering fist at Ambrose. "Foolish successor of mine. Go after her at once. And behead her. That is the only way I will pardon you."

"I will never kill anyone, even under your orders," Ambrose replied shakily.

"You don't understand a thing. The woman you let escape will bring misfortune to the village. In fact, she's already doing it. Go, now! And kill Harminia! All you have to do is follow my orders. Disobeying them is foolish. Keep that in mind."

Ambrose hung his head low like he always did, but he no longer nodded weakly. Shaking his head, he quietly turned to leave the room.

Suddenly, shouts from the youths came from down the hallway.

Kazuya and Ambrose exchanged looks, and bolted out of the room.

Something red and thick, like the tongue of some large animal, was squirming toward them.

Fire.

The thick, blue velvet curtains hanging over the hallway windows burst into flames and fell to the floor, writhing like a creature in its final agonizing moments. The fire spread to the gray carpet, growing fiercer.

"Fire!" yelled one of the youths as they came scuttling back.

"Harminia started a fire!" another added.

Kazuya squinted. Beyond the swirling flames was a woman holding up a torch in one hand, standing still like a broken doll. Harminia. Her eyeballs were bulging, and her head, cocked at an angle, looked like it would fall off at any moment.

The group of young men ran toward the other end of the corridor.

"Out the back door! The fire hasn't reached the back yet!"

Kazuya snapped back to his senses and ran back to the study. Hearing the young men's screams, Mildred and Inspector Blois hurried out of the room. Kazuya weaved past them, found Victorique standing alone in the middle of the room, and pulled her by the hand.

“Victorique, there’s a fire! Hurry!”

Ambrose leapt in behind him. He rushed to Sergius and snatched the old man’s cane. He then carried the old man on his back and followed Kazuya and Victorique out the study.

The white smoke filling the hallways stung Kazuya’s eyes.

“Close your eyes!” he told Victorique, and ran, enduring the stinging sensation.

He glanced over to his side. Victorique was running as fast as she could with her eyes tightly closed. She was slow. Ambrose, who was carrying Sergius on his back, overtook her. Still, she ran straight without fear, despite only having Kazuya’s hand to guide her. Her grip on his hand tightened.

The two stumbled out the shabby back door. Coughing from the smoke, Kazuya looked up at the manor.

The manor was on fire. Crackling flames soared higher and higher into the dark sky. The manor that looked like a gigantic Gray Wolf when Kazuya first saw it remained motionless as flames engulfed it.

“Harminia!” Sergius snarled. He was kneeling on the hard dirt, his face reddish-black with rage, looking up at the night sky. There was an aura of deep resentment around him. Ambrose seemed to have left, leaving the old man alone. “Harminia! Killing Elder Theodore wasn’t enough for you, and now you’ve even set the village on fire!”

Victorique, her eyes now open, gasped. Kazuya followed her gaze and saw the Nameless Village in flames.

Everything—roofs, trees—was aflame. The blazing inferno dyed the stone walls an ominous red. Houses seemed as if they were wearing hats of fire, their straw-thatched roofs sputtering flames that rose into the night sky. The whole village looked like a giant, glittering chandelier, shimmering red.

Villagers gathered in the square, drawing water from the well and pouring it over the flames.

Ambrose was nowhere to be seen.

From the far end of the square came the shouts of young men. They were saying something. Soon, Ambrose appeared from the circle and came running toward Kazuya. His long, golden hair was loose, hanging down softly on his shoulders. When he spotted Kazuya, he yelled, “It’s Harminia!” His face was twisted in horror.

Kazuya and Victorique started running, through the square and down the cobblestone streets, weaving through the flames, until they reached the entrance to the village.

Ambrose's trembling finger pointed to the drawbridge, the only path connecting the village to the outside world.

The drawbridge had been lowered.

Ambrose then directed their attention to the top of the stone turret, where the young men of the village kept a lookout, lowering the drawbridge when guests arrived.

While the rest of the village was ablaze, only the turret stood wrapped in jet-black darkness.

Someone was hiding at the top.

Dark blue, old-fashioned clothes. Golden hair in thin braids. Bulging, dark-green eyes.

It was Harminia. Slowly, she glanced down at the group. Her eyes opened wide.

She raised the blazing torch in her hand. Flames hissed. Harminia stood there, a spear on her other hand, looking like an ancient warrior.

A moment later, she laughed.

Her eyes were bulging, and her mouth looked as though it would split open. It was the first time Kazuya had ever seen her laugh.

Harminia crouched down, and the next instant, her body stretched to the point where it looked twice as long. In one graceful motion, she leapt off the turret toward them and landed on the ground. She watched the group. It was difficult to tell where her wide eyes were looking.

Kazuya moved in front of Victorique.

"You ruined everything," Harminia growled, readying her spear.

Trembling, Kazuya shielded Victorique. Ambrose's eyes darted between Harminia and the young boy.

Kazuya shot Harminia a glare. "No one ruined anything. Victorique was only clearing her mother's name! Because of you, an innocent person was branded a criminal for twenty whole years."

"She ruined everything for me," Harminia repeated. She cocked her head and looked at Victorique with a smile, a smile that vanished in an instant, sucked into the void. "Daughter of Cordelia. You will stay there until you die!"

Kazuya gasped and covered Victorique from Harminia. But the maid did not attack.

She turned around and ran across the drawbridge. Her figure receded quickly into the distance. Kazuya could clearly see the soles of her shoes. Black leather shoes, black soles. An ominous color.

Realizing what she was about to do, Ambrose shouted, “Harminia, no!”

“Now you can’t follow me!”

“Harminia!”

After crossing the bridge, she turned back to the group, lowering her torch.

Villagers gathered around. Harminia alone was standing on the other side of the drawbridge. Villagers and their guests stood frozen in place.

“Harminia’s planning to burn the bridge!” Ambrose exclaimed.

Kazuya’s breath caught.

Harminia tossed the torch toward the middle of the bridge. The flames danced, and slowly started spreading.

Sergius arrived, supported by the villagers. Ambrose spun and was about to say something, but Sergius cut him off.

“Ambrose, your hair is untied.”

“What...?” Ambrose was stupefied.

“I always tell you to tie it up properly,” the old man said vexedly. “Now fix your hair.”

“But the bridge!”

“We don’t need it. All we need is this village. Going outside is unnecessary.”

Ambrose let out a groan. He no longer hung his head low like he always did when Sergius scolded him. He simply stared straight back at the village chief.

The bridge, just wide enough for one carriage, was about to burst into flames. The thick ropes at both sides were ablaze, and the bridge was beginning to bounce slightly up and down. The wooden planks were slowly turning black.

“Let’s go, Victorique!” Kazuya said. “We gotta get across!” He pulled on her hand.

Victorique glanced up at him, terrified. “But...”

“If the bridge falls, we won’t be able to get back!”

“But she’s waiting on the other side.”

“If you’re scared, just close your eyes. Understand?”

Without waiting for an answer, Kazuya started running. Victorique followed quietly behind. He looked over his shoulder and saw her squeezing her eyes shut, just as she had done earlier while running down the hallway of the manor. The adorable frown on her face gave Kazuya relief.

“Inspector!” he shouted behind him. “You too, Mildred!”

Both their faces were pale from fear.

Trembling, the guests raced across the burning bridge.

The bridge was shaking. And burning.

Kazuya glanced down.

He couldn’t see the bottom of the night-shrouded abyss; he only knew that it was dark and deep. The roar of a muddy stream echoed far below.

Everyone else was trembling with terror, while Kazuya alone remained calm as he crossed the bridge. He looked over his shoulder and saw the fear-stricken faces of Inspector Blois and Mildred. Kazuya found it puzzling at first, but then it hit him.

I get it now! I’ve grown accustomed to this, because I frequently climbed the stairs up the library. I was scared at first, too, until I got used to it.

As they made it halfway through the bridge, a roar sounded from up ahead. Victorique shuddered and clung to Kazuya, who sensed her small body trembling from within layers of frills. He held her close to shield her.

He lifted his head, and saw the sharp tip of a metal coming from the front.

It was Harminia, brandishing her spear. She was charging straight at them, wailing. The drawbridge, on the verge of burning down, shook violently with the maid’s movement.

Harminia was going straight for Kazuya... no, for Victorique.

The inspector, Derek, and Mildred slipped past them.

The tip of the spear was an ominous black. At the other end of the weapon was Harminia, laughing like a madman. Her head wobbled from side to side; it looked like it could fall to the bottom of the ravine at any second. Kazuya backed away, still shielding Victorique behind him. The burning bridge swayed precariously. Flames raging on the ropes licked Kazuya’s cheek.

The tip of the spear grazed Kazuya's right arm. It was hot. He glanced at his arm and saw that his thin, long sleeve had been cut. Blood was seeping out from the wound. He looked over his shoulder. Victorique's eyes were shut tight.

Kazuya suddenly realized how scary it was to run with your eyes closed. He had told her to close her eyes and follow him, but without being able to see what was going on around her, it was terrifying to even walk, let alone run.

But she did as she was told, closed her eyes, gripped Kazuya's hand, and followed him.

Did she perhaps have faith in his ability?

If so, it was a first for Kazuya. No one but Victorique had put their trust on him like this before. His father and older brothers had high expectations of him, and his mother and older sisters adored him, but no one had ever believed in his abilities and entrusted him with something important.

I have to keep Victorique safe no matter what.

Harminia swung her spear, and Kazuya dodged each time, all the while protecting Victorique.

Sergius' ominous voice played in his mind.

What was the fortune again?

"Years from now... a gale strong enough to shake the world will blow."

"The gale will separate you."

"No matter how strong your feelings are, you are no match for the wind."

"Your hearts will never be apart."

Kazuya swallowed.

It's just fortune-telling. It won't come true. There's no way someone who's lived in this medieval village their whole life would know anything about a wind that could shake the whole world. But what if...

He held Harminia's gaze.

If he's right, then it's not yet time for me and Victorique to part. We're going home safe and sound. Back to St. Marguerite Academy. To our home.

The spear lunged at them both. Kazuya pushed Victorique aside and took a few steps back, and the spear slipped right in the middle of the two.

Realizing that they had been separated, Kazuya's breath seized. Harminia noticed it as well.

Harminia grinned. Her eyes were bloodshot. "I'll start with you... You're dying first!" She raised the spear toward Kazuya.

The bridge blazed.

Anticipating Kazuya's escape, Harminia thrust the spear as hard as she could toward Kazuya's left side, a safer spot with weaker flames.

Kazuya, however, moved in the opposite direction—to the right. He had left Victorique alone on that side. Harminia looked at Kazuya curiously. Her face seemed to ask, "What are you doing over there?"

Harminia lost her balance. Her spear had struck an empty space. She had put too much force in her strike with the intention of killing Kazuya. She stumbled and fell from the bridge, down into the abyss.

An unforgettable, chilling cry faded into the darkness below, swallowed up by the void.

It was too dark to see, but Kazuya knew that down there was the bottom of the ravine, where a muddy river streamed past. His hair stood on end.

Snap.

The bridge was starting to fall. Walls of flame roared on both sides, leaving only a small path in the middle to pass through.

Kazuya snapped back to his senses and started running, pulling Victorique's hand.

With about ten steps remaining, Kazuya held Victorique close and pushed through. Only one more step.

He felt relieved. He managed to take Victorique to safety. With his own power.

Suddenly, Kazuya's body lurched. At first, he thought it was because of relief. But no—the bridge had tilted.

The bridge finally collapsed, bright, orange embers drifting down into the abyss.

One last step.

Victorique was the first to reach solid ground. Kazuya followed after.

But his body reeled along with the bridge. Victorique spun and let out a yelp. Her face disappeared from his field of vision, and the night sky—a sky full of stars—filled his view.

It was beautiful.

The next instant, his body started falling.
Down the ravine.

The stars quickly receded. Kazuya saw the cliff, Victorique shouting from the top, Inspector Blois peering down at Kazuya in shock, Mildred and Ambrose screaming. On the other side, there was a beautiful, but ancient village frozen in time, with a cathedral and stone arches built during the Middle Ages. Flames were smoldering still.

Kazuya saw the pendant—a gold coin on a chain—that Victorique had shown him at the inn, hanging down her neck. It peeked out of the layers of frills, coming toward him.

As he fell, that one moment seemed to stretch for a long, long time. He observed Victorique's pendant rather calmly. *Wait, what's Ambrose doing on that side?* He tried to voice his question, but he couldn't get the words out. His body shifted, and he started plummeting into the darkness.

Everything seemed to be moving away from him.
He suddenly missed his family.

Memories flashed through his mind—the color of the sky in his hometown, the raging sea when he crossed the ocean by ship, the first time he entered his dorm room at St. Marguerite Academy. And that spring day when Ms. Cecile asked him to climb up the labyrinthine stairs of the Grand Library for the first time.

For a moment, a mixture of frustration, pride, and regret gnawed at him. His mind cast back to the country of his birth.

Why he left...

Dad, my brothers... I'm sorry.

I couldn't be the son and brother you wanted me to be. So I ran away. I didn't really come to this country to study. I just couldn't stay at home. When I was around you guys, I felt so pathetic. I just didn't want to feel worthless any more. Sorry. It's not that I hate you. In fact, I have so much respect for you guys.

Inside Kazuya's heart was a set of labyrinthine stairs, where he wandered around, lost.

I don't know what to do. I've come to hate myself. I was lost and in pain, so I ran away. I'm an utterly worthless man. Victorique was right. I'm a mediocre egghead. Just an average man. Insignificant. So even if I die here...

A golden butterfly crossed his vision. A small butterfly with translucent wings. He had seen one in the past.

Tears welled up in Kazuya's eyes.

It's okay if I die... I'm worthless anyway...

The golden butterfly...

Saving Victorique from harm is a commendable thing...

The faces of Victorique, Mildred, Ambrose, and Inspector Blois receded slowly.

But there was one thing that stayed. Victorique's precious pendant. Instead of moving away, it was getting closer and closer. Away from Victorique's chest. Kazuya realized then that the pendant's old chain had snapped, and it was falling with him down the ravine.

Victorique's treasured pendant. She stretched her hand out, shouting something. She was reaching for the pendant.

Don't you fall with me, too... It's fine if I go down alone. You have to be careful!

His body swayed.

Kazuya's mind went blank. He had no idea what was happening. He felt as if someone had shaken him awake, pulling him back to reality.

His vision tumbled. There was a dark and solid cliff before his eyes.

"Kujou!" someone called from above.

Kazuya looked up and saw Victorique. She had a strained look to her face, as though she was exerting all her strength onto something. Her rosy cheeks were turning red in agony. *What's she doing up there?* he wondered. She's so small.

He glanced at his hand and realized that she was pulling him up.

Kazuya was suspended over the cliff, and Victorique, crouched down on the ground, was gripping his hand tight.

In front of him was the cliff, from which he caught the faint smell of dirt.

The rushing of water came from far below, the sound of the muddy stream raging past.

Victorique was clenching her teeth.

Kazuya looked at her hands. Even when she was weak, she was desperately trying to pull him up with her tiny hands. She could hardly lift a small chair by herself.

“Victorique, you dropped your precious pendant.”

She did not answer. Kazuya realized that the reason Victorique had reached out was not to catch the pendant, but to grab his hand.

He stared at her hands. The back of her small hands had become pale, turning purple. Clenching her pearly white teeth, she shouted.

“What are you doing, Kujou?! Climb up, you dolt!”

“But I’m...”

“Stop talking and start climbing. You stupid, mediocre, lousy, foul, tone-deaf reaper!”

“I don’t think I’m foul...”

“Move!”

Kazuya regarded Victorique very curiously. He wondered why she was trying so hard. Then it came to him.

“Victorique...”

“What?!”

“Your hands hurt, don’t they?”

“No.

“You’re lying.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“But—”

“I said: it doesn’t hurt!”



Kazuya studied her face.

Ah! There's no way it doesn't hurt. She's sensitive to pain. She's lying. It's the first time I've seen her lying. What a weird face.

Her cheeks were more puffed out than usual, and her emerald green eyes were moist.

“Hurry up, Kujou! What are you smiling at?! I said move it!”

Kazuya snapped back to his senses. Victorique’s tiny feet were slowly nearing the edge. If she kept this up, she would fall with him, but she never let go of his hand.

“I told you the other day. We’re going home together.”

“... You did.”

“Hurry up, you stupid, foul, tone-deaf reaper!”

“Sorry. You’re right, Victorique.”

“Right about what?!” she snapped.

“Thanks,” Kazuya said quietly.

“You moroooon!”

Kazuya chuckled in response.

He grabbed a tree root sticking out of the ground. With a lot of effort, he managed to pull himself up a little bit.

Slowly and steadily, he moved upwards. He could hear Victorique’s small breaths. The crackling of the flames in the distance, too. Finally, he made it above ground.

He took a breath. He was so exhausted, he just wanted to fall asleep.

Kazuya took a deep breath. As he exhaled, the sorrow that had overtaken him moments ago seemed to leave his body.

He kneeled down and breathed in and out. He lifted his head and looked at Victorique, who was hunched over beside him.

She was sitting on the ground with her small hands open. She studied her palms curiously.

Kazuya also peered into her palms. Her hands were red and swollen as if burned. Never having held anything heavy, her skin was very fragile.

“Victorique.”

When she noticed Kazuya’s gaze, she quickly put her hands behind her back. She observed the bleeding wound on Kazuya’s arm inquisitively.

“Uhm... I...”

Victorique snorted, then turned her back to Kazuya. “You thought it would be fine if you fell, didn’t you?”

“Well...”

She was furious. Kazuya scratched his head. He didn’t know what to say.

“You’re not allowed to fall.”

“...Yeah.”

“Idiot,” Victorique mumbled in a barely audible voice.

By the time the curtain of night fell, the flames roaring in the village had died out. A short time later, a carriage arrived from Horovitz to pick them up. It was dark, and the old man seemed unaware of the strange events that had befallen the nameless village. He eyed everyone—Kazuya, Victorique, Inspector Blois, Derek, Mildred, and Ambrose.

“I was supposed to pick up six passengers,” he said. “I’m not sure it’s the right faces, though.”

Before he climbed into the carriage, Ambrose looked back at the basin where the village was located. Wrapped in the darkness of night, the valley seemed uninhabited. Like a stubborn old man, it was just there, unmoving.

“I was watching the bridge burn, and I found myself running across it,” he muttered to no one in particular. “I’ve always wanted to cross that bridge. Ever since Brian Roscoe told me about the outside world, when I learned that there was more to the world than just our nameless village. I was the only one who couldn’t see it as my resting place.”

Ambrose climbed into the carriage with confidence. He reached for the linen string tying his hair, unraveled it, and tossed it out the window. His elegant, golden hair billowed and fell in front of his handsome, feminine face.

“It’s nice outside,” Victorique mumbled.

Kazuya swallowed, and gently squeezed her hand.

Feigning ignorance, Inspector Blois glanced over at his half-sister. “After all this mess, you might never step outside again.”

“Still, I’m happy.”

Kazuya was taken aback. This was the first time these strangely-distant siblings had ever had anything resembling a proper conversation, albeit a

rather sinister one.

"I have proved Cordelia's innocence," Victorique said. "A daughter must defend her mother's honor."

Inspector Blois snorted. "Even if Cordelia Gallo was wrongfully banished from her village, it doesn't change the fact that that woman was responsible for a lot of things in the last Great War. It also won't change the fact that her daughter will never be granted freedom."

"You're just parroting father's words, aren't you?"

Inspector Blois grunted and glowered at his little half-sister. Victorique returned his gaze quietly, without a hint of fear.

There was silence.

The carriage began descending the steep road, rocking as violently as it did on their way to the village.

"What's gonna happen to that village now?" Kazuya said to no one in particular.

"Who knows?" Ambrose, sitting across him, answered. "I'm sure it will take a while to build another drawbridge. But they will probably continue living the same lifestyle." His face was pale and haggard.

"What about you?"

"I've always longed to see the outside world. I don't know what will happen from here on out, but I want to live outside."

"What's so good about the outside?" Derek interjected bitterly in his high-pitched voice. "You people don't understand the value of those antiques. It's unfortunate that a lot of them turned to ashes."

Mildred sighed. "Right. That means money going up in flames. Ah, how my heart aches..."

Inspector Blois poked Derek in the head. "Derek, you were about to be judged by the laws of that village. A brutal punishment was clearly waiting for you, worse than what Sauville's laws could hand down. Did you see the axe? Imagine getting beheaded by that blunt, rusty thing. Doesn't it make you shudder? I'd bet you wouldn't get decapitated right away. You'd suffer for a while, the executioner swinging the axe over and over, until you're finally dead." He fell silent, as though horrified by his own words.

Silence reigned in the carriage for a while.

The horses' hooves clopped rhythmically down the road. The carriage rocked wildly.

Inspector Blois broke the silence. "What did he mean by the Kingdom of Saillune anyway?"

"Saillune?" Victorique asked.

The inspector turned to Kazuya. He didn't want to talk to his sister any longer. Like he always did, he started talking to Kazuya instead.

"While I was arguing with the village chief about how to deal with Derek, he said something strange. 'This is not the Kingdom of Sauville. This is not a village.' And then he proudly declared, 'This is the Kingdom of Saillune, and I am the king.'"

The inspector shrugged. "Just because you live deep in the mountains, you can't just call your village a nation and give it a name. This land is within Sauville territory. What a bunch of weirdos." Noticing Ambrose's gaze, he added, "My apologies."

Victorique breathed a deep sigh. "I see. I get it now."

All eyes turned to her. Wearily, she brushed her long, golden hair, then narrowed her eyes a little and glanced at Kazuya, who was sitting next to her.

"Kujou, do you remember what I told you about the special race of people?"

"Ah, yeah." Kazuya nodded. "You mentioned Greek gods, Norse giants, and Chinese heavenly beings..."

"Yes. While I was reading those books, I learned that there are many historical accounts—mostly ancient—that talk about god-like people." She sighed. "Long ago, there were forest folks that ruled the lands of Eastern Europe. Legends about them still remain to this day. The Baltic Sea coast was exposed to countless invaders, but the forest people always came out victorious. They had neither height nor physical strength, but their extraordinary intelligence allowed them to defeat the foreign invaders. They defeated the Khazars in the ninth century, the Pechenegs in the tenth to eleventh centuries, and the Polovets in the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century, they also defeated the Mongols. Many of their enemies were large horsemen who attacked from the plains. They enjoyed a period of prosperity, but after the fifteenth century, they disappeared without a trace.

Not because of war. One day, they suddenly vanished from history. Where did they go?"

The carriage was quiet.

"They were called the Saillune people."

"Ah!" Ambrose gasped. "I don't know much about history, but in our village, kids are taught that we're the people of Saillune. That the village was in fact, a kingdom, and we were not in Sauville. But we're not allowed to mention it. We were forbidden to speak the name either, because we'd be persecuted and burned to death."

"Indeed, they were a persecuted people." Victorique said, nodding. "What comes to mind when you think of the fifteenth century? It was the time of the Inquisition and witch hunts. The petite, clever, and enigmatic Saillune people were caught in the wave and labeled heretics. Shortly after, they could no longer sustain their small kingdom on the Baltic Sea coast. They were driven out, not by war, but by persecution. Legends of the Gray Wolves spread rapidly in Sauville after the fifteenth century. Legends about silent, talking wolves dwelling deep in the forests, and smart kids being called spawns of Gray Wolves. I believe the legends were born from the fact that the Saillune people fled deep into the mountains of Sauville and lived there in seclusion. The reason why they were called Gray Wolves may be because of the wolves that used to live in abundance in the forests of Eastern Europe, their former home. However, after fleeing to Sauville, their settlement was burned to the ground whenever they were found, forcing them to move further into the forest. Eventually, their numbers dwindled, and only tradition and an old village remained. I believe that is the true nature of that village."

"Do you guys remember the festival?" Victorique continued in a low voice. "The battle between the Summer Army and the Winter Army. It was a ritual to pray for a good harvest, and there are similar customs all over Europe. But why did only the Winter Army ride horses? I offer a hypothesis. It may be because throughout their history, all their enemies rode in horsebacks. The ritual was intended to drive both winter and the large horsemen, who attacked season after season, back from the fertile forests to the dry plains."

The carriage rumbled down the mountain, rocking hard. Victorique's face brightened and dimmed repeatedly under the lamplight. No one said

anything.

“Either way, that was a long time ago,” Victorique said in her husky voice. “We are living in the present moment. In the now.”

The carriage shook, presumably from running over a rock or a large root. The lamp briefly illuminated Ambrose’s face.

“The present?” he muttered.

Victorique nodded.

“I see... In that case, I can live on.”

He seemed to smile faintly, but it was too dark to see.

Mildred yawned loudly. “All this difficult stuff is beyond me. As long as you’re healthy and have money, you’re good. What I would give for a lot more money, though!”

Ambrose chuckled. Kazuya smiled as well. Mildred yawned again and closed her eyes wearily.

The carriage continued lumbering down the mountain, the horses’ hooves clopping on the winding road.

Victorique gave a small yawn.

“Tired? Do you wanna sleep?”

She nodded silently, then whispered, “Sing for me, Kujou.”

“Me? Sing?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Fine...” Kazuya sighed.

Then, in a hushed tone, he began humming his signature nursery rhyme. As he sang, he thought he heard Victorique laugh.

“Wh-What?” he asked.

“You suck.”

“Back at you.”

Victorique continued chuckling.

The carriage still had a long way to go.

It was deep into the night when they finally arrived at the town at the foot of the mountain. The group decided to stay at the only inn available and leave the next morning. When the innkeeper saw Ambrose’s golden hair, feminine features, and medieval attire, he looked horrified.

“A Gray Wolf...!”

But the fear from his face gradually faded as Ambrose, not caring about his remark, bombarded him with questions—questions about running an inn, how the phone worked, the dead bird hanging on the front door. In fact, he got fed up with the young man.

“Stop asking me questions! What are you, five?!” He then stormed off somewhere.

It was a beautiful day the next morning. They boarded a train down the mountain, then switched to a different train, before finally arriving back at their village, where St. Marguerite Academy was located, around noon.

Mildred had put on her stuffy habit over her summer dress and headed back to the church. “Ah, back to a boring life,” she had grumbled. But when she closed her mouth, her crimson, curly hair tucked inside her robe, her face tightened slightly, she looked just like a normal nun. She left with loud footsteps.

Inspector Blois hailed a carriage and took Derek to the police station.

“Return to the academy for now,” he said, looking out the window. “I will contact the academy for further instructions.”

His grim tone made Kazuya uneasy, but right now he had no idea what was going to happen in the future.

The carriage carrying Inspector Blois and Derek lumbered away. Mildred was no longer in sight.

Everyone returned to the place where they belonged.

The journey had ended.

As they walked out of the station onto the village’s main street, a pleasant, early summer breeze blew. Many people milled about on the main street. The stores lining the street were busy, customers coming and going frequently.

A horse-drawn carriage passed by, and on the other side, a state-of-the-art automobile zipped past, rattling.

Ambrose observed the streets curiously. “So this is the present...” He started walking somewhere, his face a mixture of anxiety and delight. Kazuya and Victorique watched him go.

A gentle breeze whistled, carrying the sweet smell of fruit and warm earth from the vineyards. In the distant train station came the whistling of the oncoming train.

Everything was as it was supposed to be.

Ambrose came running back, suddenly remembering something. He grabbed Kazuya and whispered in his ear.

"I almost forgot to tell you something about the divination," the young man said.

"You mean the one at the festival?"

"Yes. You and your friend..."

"Me and Victorique?"

"Yes."

Ambrose shook his head. "Why did you two ask the same question?"

"The same... question?" Kazuya looked puzzled.

Back then, Victorique came out of the cathedral, looking upset, tears in her eyes.

He thought she must have been told something very shocking. She said she asked if she would grow taller.

Same question? I didn't ask about my height.

Kazuya ruminated on it for a while. When he finally realized the truth, his breath caught.

It's the other way around! Victorique asked the same thing I did. It wasn't about her height at all...

She asked if she and Kazuya Kujou would be together forever.

And the answer she received was the same as Kazuya's.

That's why she was on the verge of tears.

"I just thought that if you two had asked different questions, I'd hear two different futures. But I guess she really wanted to know." With that, he wandered off casually.

Kazuya returned to stand next to Victorique. As he stared at her face, Victorique grimaced.

"What are you looking at?"

"N-Nothing."

"Then stop staring at me."

"Why, I oughta..."

His forgotten rage resurfaced.

Victorique really pissed him off. She was smart, had a sharp tongue, and was such a handful. He strongly believed that there was something wrong with her, not him. She always made fun of him, worked him like a slave, and then treated him like a nuisance. And then...

And then...

I'm glad we made it back safely.

Kazuya watched Ambrose receding into the distance.

When he first met the young man in the nameless village, he looked like the typical resident, with his old-fashioned clothes and polite attitude. Only the sparkle in his eyes betrayed his spirited side. But now, as Ambrose walked down the modern main street, his hands in his pockets, whistling and walking slowly, he quickly integrated with the surroundings, becoming part of the scene on the main street. His clothes, too, looked less strange, now, as his demeanor changed. A village girl passing Ambrose turned and stared at him intently in admiration. When he noticed, he gave a cordial nod, a little embarrassed.

He had adapted very quickly.

A warm breeze blew, and his long, silky blonde hair hanging behind him stirred. When the wind died down, Ambrose was already gone. He must have taken a turn somewhere.

“What’s he gonna do now?” Kazuya murmured worriedly.

Victorique was silent for a while. Her eyes were filled with a curious light—a yearning of some sorts. She seemed to envy Ambrose’s freedom, but she did not say anything. She only answered Kazuya’s question curtly.

“He will live on. Just like Cordelia Gallo.”

And thus, their journey came to an end.



Epilogue: Friend

It was a beautiful sunny day.

The early summer sun shone brightly on the dry, hard-packed dirt of the main street. The vines crawling on the wooden houses, and the red geranium flowers hanging from the second-floor windows sparkled under the sunlight.

A peaceful and pleasant afternoon.

The door of a small post office in the corner of the village slowly opened, and a small oriental boy dressed in the uniform of St. Marguerite Academy stepped out. He put his schoolcap on, straightened his back, and started walking.

In his hands was a small square parcel that had arrived by international mail.

From the small flower shop across the street, a slim, tall girl in the same uniform emerged. She had short, blonde hair and a bright, lively features.

The girl's face lit up when he saw the boy, Kazuya Kujou.

"Kujou!" she called.

Kazuya smiled when he saw the girl, Avril Bradley. "Hello, Avril."

"What are you doing? Ah, the post office again this week, huh? Is that mail from back home?"

"Yeah. I finally got the book I asked for from my brother—"

Avril snatched the package from Kazuya and opened the seal.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"Allowance? Aw, what a bummer."

Avril was disappointed to find that the parcel only contained an old-looking book written in an Asian language.

"I told you it was a book. I wrote to my brother a while ago asking him to send it to me," Kazuya said as he resumed walking. "It finally arrived. A bit later than I hoped, though."

"I see... What kind of a book is it?"

"It's, uh... Nah, never mind. It's nothing special."

Kazuya suddenly turned red and snatched the green-covered book from Avril.

Pouting, Avril took it back again. She flipped through the book and studied it, but since she could not understand Asian languages, she returned it to Kazuya reluctantly.

The street was a little hazy from the clouds of dust. A wagon pulled by a hairy old horse passed by them, loaded with a mountain of hay. It smelled slightly sweet and sour—the smell of early summer.

As they neared the academy, the street became less crowded. There were fewer houses, and the gentle slope stretched into the distance, toward the mountains.

“Oh, by the way,” Kazuya said, trying to change the subject. “A lot of things happened last week, and I don’t want to talk about it because it would take forever, but do you remember the nun we met at the bazaar?”

“Yeah.”

“We actually got acquainted. Her name is Mildred. She said she’d give me one of the items she was selling at the bazaar, so I, uh... got this for you.” Kazuya rummaged through his bag.

Avril’s face lit up, and she cheerfully peered inside as well. “For me?”

“Yeah. It looked like you really wanted it, so...”

An ominous, golden glow came from the bag.

The smile vanished from Avril’s face.

“You were whining about how you really wanted it, so here, I got it for you,” he said. Kazuya glanced up, holding the golden object, and saw Avril pouting. She seemed furious. “Hmm? What’s wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Kazuya stared at Avril with a fist-sized golden skull on his head like a clown.

Avril stared back at him. For some reason, tears began to form at the corners of her bright, blue eyes.

“Uh, hello?” Kazuya said. His head shifted, and the golden skull fell. It rolled down the gently-sloping street, sending dust in the air. He quickly went after it.

“Kujou, you dummy!” Avril cried.

“Uh, what?”

When Kazuya finally picked up the skull and looked up, Avril was running down the street with the graceful motion of an antelope.

Stunned, Kazuya gave chase, but Avril was so fast that he barely managed to close the distance even a little. When he reached the front of the academy, he saw the edge of Avril's skirt disappearing into the campus through the hole she had made by slashing branches with a machete.

"Wait, Avril! Why are you mad at me? Hey!"

Kazuya hurried through the hole, thin branches poking him, and made it to the academy grounds, leaves all over his body.

"Avril... Oh, Ms. Cecile. H-Hi..."

Avril was no longer there. She seemed to have run off, and instead, he found Ms. Cecile with her large, round glasses, crouched down on the lawn, admiring the violets. Their eyes met.

"Kujou...?"

Kazuya quickly brushed away the leaves and twigs on his clothes. Ms. Cecile regarded him curiously, and when she finally realized what was going on, her breath caught, and she gazed at the hedge.

There was something that shouldn't be there—a small hole, just big enough for one person to pass through.

"Kujou?!"

"I'm sorry!"

"So the one who stepped on my violets..."

"It was me. I'm really sorry."

"I see. So Victorique snuck out last week using this hole. You and Victorique both insisted that the main gate was open, so I believed you. But you actually passed through here. A-Am I right, Kujou?!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

Kazuya bowed and apologized repeatedly. Furious, Ms. Cecile went on to lecture him about the violets, the lawn, and Victorique.

The hole was later closed by the gardener.

Avril's gonna be really disappointed, Kazuya thought. He glimpsed golden hair from behind a tree.

Avril, he realized. She had returned to the academy before him, but she must have noticed Kazuya getting caught by the teacher and came to check on him.

In the end, Ms. Cecile sentenced Kazuya to one month of toilet cleaning and a week-long ban from going out at night.

As he walked away, hanging his head low, something hit him on the head. Rubbing his head, he turned around and saw Avril running away. A rolled-up piece of paper was lying at his feet. *Is this what hit me?*

He picked it up and opened it. He was right. It contained a message written in Avril's round and thin handwriting.

Dear Kujou,

Thanks for not telling the teacher that I was the one who created the hole.

And I don't want the skull, you dummy!

From Avril

Kazuya smoothened the crumpled paper, folded it into a square, and placed it in his breast pocket.

He was still clueless.

"I guess I'm a dummy, cause I don't know why I'm a dummy," he muttered.

A strong wind suddenly blew past, ruffling his black hair and his school uniform. When it died down, it felt very warm. Summer was just right around the corner.

"The fact that you're aware of it means you've gotten a little smarter, Kujou the idiot."

St. Marguerite Academy's Grand Library.

An old and majestic building that was more than three hundred years old. After surviving the Great War, it became known as one of Europe's finest bookhouses.

But since only students and related personnel were allowed inside the academy, very few knew of its existence. The library was always quiet, filled with dust, dirt, and the smell of intelligence.

Inside, a maze of wooden stairs lead all the way up high. That afternoon too, Kazuya had spent several minutes climbing the stairs to reach his friend at the top.

On the top floor was a skylight where bright sunlight poured in, and a conservatory filled with tropical plants and flowers. And there was petite girl with beautiful features reminiscent of a porcelain doll. She was there that day, as she always was.

The girl—Victorique de Blois—was buried in a pile of books, as calm as if their weekend excursion had never happened. She had not heard from her half-brother, Grevil de Blois. If only there would be no repercussions for what she did... but a tinge of uneasiness still remained.

A white wisp of smoke rose from her small mouth holding a ceramic pipe to the skylight. Kazuya used the smoke as a beacon to find Victorique's small body in the pile of books, and sat down next to her.

"Can you stop calling me an idiot?" Kazuya grumbled. "I've been getting it from women all day. I'm kinda down in the dumps right now."

"You reap what you sow. I don't really care about the details."

Kazuya clicked his tongue in irritation.

Victorique remained cool. "You're a buffoon. You talk like you know people when you don't, and then you get mad at them for something ridiculous, ending friendships."

"Wh-Where'd that come from?!"

"How about you ask yourself?"

"What's your problem? Whatever. By the way, do you want this? I don't know what it is, though, so I can't tell you what to use it for."

Smoking her pipe, Victorique lifted her head from the huge, thick book. She glanced at what Kazuya was holding, then returned her head back.

"Wh-What is that?!" she exclaimed.

Kazuya slowly pulled back the golden skull. "I'm not really sure. A paperweight, maybe?"

"Kujou, you are, for the most part, a very dull simpleton."

"Get off my case!"

"Sometimes you just stop making any sense."

"That's not a compliment, is it?"

"Is this some kind of oriental mystery? Or are you the only one who's weird?!"

Kazuya couldn't take Victorique's sharp tongue any longer, so he shut his mouth. "I'll just leave this here," he mumbled, placing the golden skull on the floor.

Then he noticed something on the floor. The strange Indian turban that he had given her. She really didn't like it, it seemed. It was on the floor, upside-down. Inside was a pile of whiskey bonbons and macaroons.

Victorique's Wellspring of Wisdom, it seemed, had decided to relaunch the turban as a container for candies instead. Kazuya placed the skull next to the turban.

A bizarre spot, he mused.

"Speaking of oriental mysteries," Kazuya said.

"What is it, Kujou, the foolish reaper from across the sea?"

"You always have to get in a word or two, huh?"

Despondent, Kazuya took something out of his bag. It was the book sent to him by his oldest brother.

Victorique lifted her head impassively, but when she saw it was a book, she snatched it away and began flipping through it with great interest. The unfamiliar language brought a cute wrinkle on her forehead, and she let out a groan.

The book was filled with images of two people grappling with each other.

"What kind of a book is this?" Victorique asked.

"It's a book about oriental martial arts. My father and brothers are experts, but I don't know anything about it. So I asked my eldest brother to send it to me."

"A book on martial arts, you say?" she mumbled curiously, and glanced up.

Kazuya turned his head away, blushing a little.

Last time, he and Victorique ended up in a terrifying ship, and after experiencing danger, Kazuya felt a tinge of regret. He had always been awful at the hand-to-hand combat techniques that he had learned from his father and older brothers, so he tried to avoid them at all costs. But when he was alone with Victorique on the ship without any help, he wished from the bottom of his heart that he had practiced harder.

With that in mind, Kazuya wrote a letter to his eldest brother, telling him about his grades and the country he was in, and asked him to send him a book on martial arts if possible.

However, it got delayed a little, and the book arrived after he had returned to the academy following his second adventure.

Come to think of it, he's always been like this. He gave me candy after dinner and helped me with my studies after exams. He's a nice guy, but he's always just a little late.

Perhaps that was why his eldest brother, despite being smart and good-looking, kept getting his heart broken. One time, he visited the house of his beloved with a love letter he had written all night long, only to find that she was in the middle of her wedding ceremony. His brother eventually overcame his grief after some intense *kanpu-masatsu*.

“There’s a letter in here,” Victorique said.

“What, really?”

Kazuya took the letter from her. It was written in large, crude handwriting. Definitely from his oldest brother, he thought. Kazuya opened it and started reading.

What’s gotten into you? I never expected you to ask for a book like this. Your brother and I are wracking our brains trying to figure it out. But this is a good sign. Dad and us were just talking about how we wish you would become bigger and manlier.

Kazuya felt his heart sink.

On another note, father is very pleased with your excellent academic performance. We are very proud of you. It would seem that your leaving to study abroad was the right choice. Your mother and sister miss you very much, though. Even though your brother and I are here, they still find it boring without you. It’s what they call favoritism, I suppose.

Kazuya smiled a little.

But I told them that a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. You are currently in the process of becoming a man. I told the women not to stand in your way. Kazuya, you come back as a full-fledged man as soon as possible. Be successful and become a man who will serve his country. Do not become someone worthless, who ignores his own nation. Be a splendid man. We await your return as we devote ourselves in serving the country. From Your Eldest Brother.

Kazuya closed the letter with a sigh.

His eyes took on a distant look, and he went quiet.

Victorique looked at him, slightly worried. But when her interest in the rare oriental book returned, she buried her head into it.

Then she gently lifted her head up again from the book, and glanced at Kazuya.

He heaved another sigh.

For a brief moment, Victorique wondered what was up with him, but then turned her face away again nonchalantly.

Brother... Kazuya was dejected, sitting about halfway between the stairs and the conservatory, looking down. He was brooding. I'm afraid I'm not going to be the splendid man you want me to be. Besides, is service to your own country the only way to measure a person's worth? I...

Bonk!

Kazuya felt a sudden sharp pain in the back of his head. He tried to turn around, but he lost his balance, and he screamed as he tumbled several steps down the labyrinthine stairs.

He had tumbled at an angle so that just a few more centimeters and he would have fallen into the abyss far below. He managed to cling to the railing. He got up and found Victorique looking down at him with shock, her balled fist thrust out in front of her.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were still there,” she said.

“So that was you just now, huh?”

Victorique yawned loudly and put the book down.

Kazuya crawled up the stairs. “Victorique?!”

“I just followed the illustrations in the book, and you happened to be in the way.”

“Yeah, right! You did that on purpose! Because you think it would be funny. Am I wrong?”

“So what if I did?”

“What are you going to do if I die?”

“Nothing.”

Kazuya returned to sit down beside Victorique. Holding his knees, he turned his back to her. Without saying a word, he took one of the macaroons from the candy container, peeled off the wrapper, and popped it in his mouth. Victorique shot him a glare, but did not complain.

“You’re lying,” Kazuya finally said.

“Lying? Lying about what?”

“You doing nothing. You don’t want me gone, do you?”

Victorique did not reply.

You were crying a little back when you asked about your future, Kazuya thought.

The thought made him uneasy, so he recalled a different moment as well.

And you helped me once. You tried so hard back then. Am I right?

But he didn't say the words out loud.

It was getting darker in the library as the sun slowly went down.

The sunlight streaming through the skylight turned to a lonely, subdued glow.

Victorique sat there, as she always did, reading a book.

Sitting beside her, Kazuya was still, leaning against the pile of books.

Victorique, keeping her face buried in her books, listened closely.

snore

Kazuya was breathing softly, asleep. Victorique frowned. She ignored him and continued reading her book.

A few minutes later, Victorique lifted her head back up.

“Kujou, are you asleep?”

No reply. There was only the sound of Kazuya's faint breathing.

“Are you sleeping?”

snore

“So you're asleep, then,” she repeated.

A slightly strong breeze came through the skylight, along with the warm light from the sun. The garish flowers in full bloom and large palm leaves in the garden rustled in the wind.

“I care more about my friends than books,” Victorique said.

Kazuya bolted upright. Victorique gave a start.

The wind blew again, ruffling their black and golden hairs.

Kazuya giggled, looking pleased.

A second later, Victorique's rosy cheeks turned a little red.

Gosick - Volume 02

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